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# Conquest of Plassans

.. OR ..

THE PRIEST IN THE HOUSE.

By EMILE ZOLA.

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Marthe and Abbé Faujas at Saint-Saturnin's.  
Conquest of Plassans.

THE  
CONQUEST OF PLASSANS

OR  
THE PRIEST IN THE HOUSE

A REALISTIC NOVEL

By EMILE ZOLA

Author of "Nana," "La Terre," "L'Assommoir," etc.

TRANSLATED WITHOUT ABRIDGMENT

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# THE CONQUEST OF PLASSANS

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## I

Désirée clapped her hands. She was fourteen years old and big and strong for her age, but she laughed like a little girl of five.

"Mother! mother!" she cried, "look at my doll!"

She showed her mother a piece of rag out of which she had been trying for the last quarter of an hour to manufacture a doll, rolling it up and constricting it at one end by the aid of a piece of string. Marthe raised her eyes from the stockings she was darning with as fine delicacy of work as though she were embroidering and smiled at Désirée.

"Oh! but that's only a baby," she said; "you must make a grown-up doll and it must have a dress, you know, like a lady."

She gave the child some clippings of print which she found on her work-table, and then she devoted all her attention again to her stockings. They were both sitting out at one end of the narrow terrace, the girl on a stool at her mother's feet. The setting sun of a still warm September evening poured round them its calm peaceful rays; and the garden in front of them, which was already growing gray in the increasing dusk, was wrapped in perfect silence. Outside, not a sound could be heard in this quiet corner of the town.

They both worked on for ten long minutes without speaking. Every few moments Marthe raised her head and glanced at the child with an expression in which sadness was mingled with affection. Seeing that the child's task seemed too much for her, she at last said:

"Give it to me. I will put in the sleeves for you."

As she took up the doll, two big lads of seventeen and eighteen came down the steps. They ran to Marthe and kissed her.

"Don't scold us, mother!" cried Octave gayly. "I took Serge to listen to the band. There was such a crowd in the Cours Sauvaire!"

"I thought you had been kept at the college," his mother said, "or I should have felt very uneasy."

Désirée, now altogether indifferent to her doll, had already thrown her arms round Serge's neck as she exclaimed:

"One of my birds has flown away! The blue one, the one you gave me!"

She was on the point of crying. Her mother, who had imagined that this trouble was forgotten, in vain tried to divert her thoughts by showing her the doll. The girl clung to her brother's arm and dragged him away with her as she continued to repeat:

"Come and let us go look for it."

Serge followed her with kindly complaisance and tried to console her. She led him to a little conservatory, in front of which was a cage placed on a stand. Here the girl told him how the bird had escaped just as she was opening the door to prevent it fighting with a companion.

"Well, there's nothing very surprising in that!" cried Octave, who had seated himself on the balustrade of the terrace. "She is always interfering with them, and tries to find out how they are made and what it is they

have in their throats that makes them sing. The other day she was carrying them about in her pockets the whole afternoon to keep them warm."

"Octave!" said Marthe, in a tone of reproach; "don't tease the poor child."

But Désirée had not heard him; she was explaining to Serge with much detail how the bird had flown away.

"It just slipped out, you see, like that, and then flew over yonder and lighted on Monsieur Rastoil's big pear-tree. Then it flew off to the plum-tree at the bottom, and I've never seen it again; no never again."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Perhaps it will come back again," Serge ventured to say.

"Oh! do you think so? I think I will put the others into a box, and leave the door of the cage open all night."

Octave could not restrain his laughter, but Marthe called out to Désirée:

"Come and look here! come and look here!"

She gave her the doll. It was a magnificent doll now. It had a stiff dress, a head made of a pad of calico, and arms of list sewn onto the shoulders. Désirée's eyes lighted up with sudden joy. She sat down again upon the stool, and forgetting all about the bird, began to kiss the doll and dandle it in her arms with all the childish pleasure of a little girl.

Serge had gone to lean upon the balustrade near his brother, and Marthe had resumed her knitting.

"And so the band has been playing, has it?" she asked.

"It plays every Thursday," Octave replied. "You ought to have come and heard it, mother. All the town was there. Why didn't you come too?"

Marthe did not raise her eyes, but just said softly as she finished darning a hole:

"You know very well, my dears, that I don't care about going out. I am quite contented here; and then it is necessary that some one should stay with Désirée."

Octave opened his lips to reply, but he glanced at his sister and kept silent. He remained where he was, whistling softly and raising his eyes to look at the trees of the sub-prefecture, noisy with the twittering of the sparrows who were preparing to go to rest for the night, and gazing at Monsieur Rastoil's pear-trees behind which the sun was setting. Serge had taken a book out of his pocket and was reading it attentively. A soft, tranquil silence that seemed to breathe with mute affection, brooded over the terrace as it lay in the mellow, yellow light that was growing gradually fainter. Marthe continued busily darning, ever and anon glancing round at her three children in the peaceful quiet of the evening.

"Everyone seems to be late to-day," she said after a time. "It is nearly six o'clock, and your father hasn't come home yet. I think he must have gone over to Les Tulettes."

"Oh! then, no wonder he's late!" Octave exclaimed. "The peasants at Les Tulettes are in no hurry to let him go when once they have got hold of him. Has he gone there to buy some wine?"

"I don't know," Marthe replied; "He isn't fond, you know, of talking about his business."

Then there was another interval of silence. In the dining-room, the window of which was opened widely onto the terrace, old Rose had just begun to lay the table with much angry-sounding clattering of crockery and plate. Then she went and stood at the street-door, and craning out her head, she reconnoitered the place of the sub-prefecture. After some minutes' waiting, she came up to the terrace-steps and cried:

"Monsieur Mouret isn't coming home to dinner, then?"



"Yes, Rose, wait a little longer," Marthe replied quietly.

"Everything is getting burned to cinders! There's no sense in such ways. When master is going off on these rounds he ought to give us notice! Well, it's all the same to me; but your dinner will be quite uneatable."

"Ah! do you really think so, Rose?" asked a tranquil voice just behind her. "We will eat it, notwithstanding."

It was Mouret who had just returned. Rose turned round and looked her master in the face and seemed on the point of breaking out into some angry exclamation; but at the sight of his perfectly unruffled countenance, in which was twinkling an expression of merry banter she could not find a word to say, and so she retired. Mouret made his way to the terrace, where he paced about without sitting down. He just tapped Désirée lightly on the cheek with the tips of his fingers, and the girl greeted him with a responsive smile. Marthe raised her eyes, and when she had glanced at her husband, she began to fold up her work.

"Aren't you tired?" asked Octave, looking at his father's boots which were white with dust.

"Yes, indeed, a little," Mouret replied, without saying anything more about the long journey which he had just made on foot.

Then he caught sight of a spade and a rake in the middle of the garden, which the children had forgotten to put away.

"Why are the tools not put away?" he cried. "I have spoken about it a hundred times. If it came on to rain, they would be completely rusted and spoilt."

He said no more on the subject, but stepped down into the garden and picked up the spade and rake himself, and put them carefully away inside the little conservatory. As he came up again onto the terrace, his eyes

pried into every corner of the walks to see if there was any other departure from orderliness.

"Are you learning your lessons?" he asked, as he passed Serge, who was still poring over his book.

"No, father," the boy replied; "this is a book that the Abbé Bourrette has lent me. It is an account of the missions in China."

Mouret stopped short in front of his wife.

"By the way," he said, "has anyone been here?"

"No, no one, my dear," replied Marthe with an appearance of surprise.

He seemed on the point of saying something further, but he appeared to change his mind, and he continued pacing up and down in silence. Then, going to the steps, he cried out:

"Well, Rose, what about this dinner of yours which is getting burnt to cinders?"

"Oh, indeed! there is nothing ready for you now!" shouted the angry voice of the cook from the other end of the passage. "Everything is cold. You will have to wait, sir."

Mouret smiled in silence and winked his left eye, as he glanced at his wife and children. Then he occupied himself by examining his neighbor's fruit-trees.

"It is surprising what splendid pears Monsieur Rastoil has got this year," he remarked.

Marthe, who had appeared a little uneasy for the last few minutes, seemed as though she wanted to say something. At last she made up her mind to speak, and said timidly:

"Were you expecting some one to-day, my dear?"

"Yes and no," he replied begining to walk up and down the terrace again.

"Perhaps you have let the second floor?"

"Yes, indeed, I have let it."

Then, as the unbroken silence was becoming a little embarrassing, he added, in his tranquil tones:

"This morning, before starting for Les Tulettes, I went up to see the Abbé Bourrette. He was very pressing and so I agreed. I know it won't please you; but if you will only think the matter over a little you will see that you are wrong, my dear. The second floor was of no use to us, and it was only going to ruin. The fruit that we store in the rooms creates a dampness which causes the paper to fall from the walls. By the way, now that I think of it, don't forget to remove the fruit the first thing to-morrow. Our tenant may arrive at any moment."

"We were so free and comfortable, all alone in our own house," Marthe ventured to say, in low tones.

"Oh, well!" replied Mouret, "we shall not find a priest very much in our way. He will keep to himself, and we shall keep to ourselves. These black-robed gentlemen hide themselves when they want to swallow even a glass of water. You know that I am not very partial to them myself. A set of pretenders, for the most part! And yet what chiefly decided me to let the floor was that I had happened to meet with a priest for a tenant. One is quite sure of one's money with them, and they are so quiet that one can't even hear them putting the key into the lock."

Marthe still continued to appear distressed. She looked round her at the happy home basking in the sun's farewell beams, at the garden that was now growing grayer in the evening dusk, and at her children. And she thought of all the happiness which this little spot held for her.

"And do you know anything about this priest?" she asked.

"No, but the Abbé Bourrette has taken the floor in his own name, and that is quite sufficient. The Abbé



Bourrette is an honorable man. I know that our tenant is called Faujas, the Abbé Faujas, and that he comes from the diocese of Besancon. He didn't get on very well with his vicar, and so he has been appointed curate here at St. Saturnin's. Perhaps he knows our bishop, Monseigneur Rousselot. But all this is no business of ours, you know; and it is to the Abbé Bourrette that I am trusting in the whole matter."

Marthe, however, did not seem to share her husband's confidence, and she continued to stand out against him, a thing which very seldom happened.

"You are right," she said, after a moment's silence; "the Abbé is a worthy man. But I recollect that when he came to look at the rooms, he told me that he did not know the name of the person on whose behalf he was commissioned to hire them. I really think that you ought to write to Besancon and make some inquiries as to what sort of a person it is that you are introducing into your house."

Mouret tried to suppress his feeling of irritation, and he smiled complacently.

"Well, it isn't the devil, anyhow. Why, you're trembling all over. I didn't think you were so superstitious. You surely don't believe that priests bring ill luck, as folks say. Neither, indeed, do they bring good luck. They are just like other men. Well! well! you'll see, when we get this Abbé here, if I'm afraid of his cassock!"

"No, I'm not superstitious; you know that quite well," Marthe replied. "I only feel unhappy about it, that's all."

He came and stood in front of her, and interrupted her with a sharp motion of his hand.

"There! there! that will do," he said. "I have let the rooms; don't let us say anything more about the matter."



Then, in the bantering tones of a city man who thinks he has done a good stroke of business, he added:

"At any rate one thing is certain, and that is that I am to get a hundred and fifty francs rent, to spend over the house every year."

Marthe bent her head down, and made no further protestations except by vaguely rocking her hands, while she closed her eyes as though to prevent the escape of the tears which were already swelling beneath her eyelids. She cast a furtive glance at her children, who had not appeared to hear anything of the discussion she was having with their father, accustomed as they were to scenes of this sort in which Mouret's bantering nature delighted to indulge.

"You can come in now, if you would like something to eat," said Rose with her crabby voice, as she came out onto the steps.

"Ah, that's right! Come along, children, to your soup!" Mouret cried gayly, without appearing to retain any trace of displeasure.

All the family rose. Then Désirée's grief seemed to reawaken at the sight of everyone stirring. She threw her arms around her father's neck and stammered out:

"Oh, papa, one of my birds has flown away!"

"One of your birds, my dear? Well, we'll catch it again."

Then he began to caress her and fondle her, but she insisted that he, too, should go and look at the cage. When he brought her back again, Marthe and her two sons were already in the dining-room. The rays of the setting sun streaming in through the window brightly lighted up the porcelain plates, the children's mugs and the white cloth. The room was cool and peaceful with its green back-ground of garden.

Just as Marthe, upon whom the tranquillity of the

scene had had a soothing effect, was smilingly removing the cover from the soup, a noise was heard in the passage.

Rose rushed into the room with a scared look and stammered out:

"His reverence the Abbé Faujas has come!"

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## II

An expression of annoyance passed across Mouret's face. He had not expected his tenant till the following morning at the earliest. He was just rising hastily from his seat when the Abbé Faujas himself appeared at the door. He was a tall big man, with a square face and large features and cadaverous complexion. Behind him, in the shadow, there was an elderly lady, who bore an astonishing resemblance to him, only she was smaller and wore a less refined expression. When they saw the table laid for a meal, they both seemed to hesitate and stepped back discreetly, though without going away again. The tall black figure of the priest contrasted mournfully with the cheerfulness of the white-washed walls.

"We must ask your pardon for disturbing you," he said to Mouret. "We have just left the Abbé Bourrette's; he no doubt gave you notice of our coming?"

"Not at all!" Mouret exclaimed. "The Abbé never behaves like other people. He always seems as though he had just come down from paradise. It was only this morning, sir, that he told me you would not be here for another couple of days. Well, we must put you in possession of your rooms all the same."

The Abbé Faujas apologized. He spoke with a deep voice of great softness. He was extremely distressed,

he said, to have arrived at such a moment. When he had expressed his regret without any superfluous phrases in a very few well-chosen words, he turned round to pay the porter who had brought his trunk. His large well-shaped hands drew from the folds of his cassock a purse of which nothing but its rings of steel could be seen. Keeping his head bent down, he carefully felt about in it, for a moment or two, with his fingers. Then, without anyone having seen the piece of money which he had received, the porter went away, and the priest resumed in his refined tones:

"I beg you, sir, to sit down again. Your servant will show us the rooms, and will help me carry this."

As he spoke, he stooped down to grasp one of the handles of the trunk. It was a small wood trunk, bound at the edges with iron bands, and one of its sides seemed to have been repaired with a cross-piece of deal. Mouret looked surprised, and his eyes wandered off in search of other luggage, but he could see nothing else except a big basket, which the elderly lady carried in her hands, holding it in front of her, and seeming obstinately determined not to put it down. Underneath the lid, which was a little raised, there peeped out from amongst bundles of linen the end of a comb wrapped up in paper and the neck of a clumsily corked bottle.

"Oh! don't trouble yourself with that," said Mouret, just touching the trunk with his foot; "it can't be very heavy, and Rose will be quite able to carry it up by herself."

He was quite unconscious of the contempt which his words seemed to breathe. The elderly lady looked at him keenly with her black eyes, and then her glance again fell upon the dining-room and the table, which she had been examining ever since her arrival. She kept her lips tightly compressed, while her eyes strayed from one object to another. She had not uttered a single word.



The Abbé Faujas consented to leave his trunk. In the yellow rays of the sunlight which streamed in from the garden, his threadbare cassock looked quite red; its edges were bordered with a fringe of patches; and though it was very neat and tidy, it seemed so sadly thin and worn that Marthe, who had hitherto remained seated in a sort of uneasy reserve, now rose in her turn from her seat. The Abbé, who had merely cast a rapid glance at her, and then quickly turned his eyes elsewhere, saw her leave her chair although he did not appear to be watching her.

"I beg of you," he repeated, "not to disturb yourselves. We should be extremely distressed to interfere with your dinner."

"Very well," said Mouret, who was hungry, "Rose shall show you up. Tell her to get you anything you want, and make yourselves at home."

The Abbé Faujas bowed and was making his way to the staircase when Marthe stepped up to her husband and whispered:

"But, my dear, you have forgotten—"

"What? what?" he asked, seeing her hesitate.

"There is the fruit, you know."

"Oh, bother it all, so there is!" he exclaimed with an expression of annoyance.

And, as the Abbé Faujas returned and glanced at him questioningly, he said to him:

"I am extremely vexed, sir. Father Bourrette is a very worthy man, but it is a little unfortunate that you commissioned him to look after your business. He hasn't got the least bit of a head. If we had only known of your coming, we would have had everything ready; but, as it is, we shall have to clear the whole place out for you. We have been using the rooms, you see, and we



have stowed away on the floors upstairs all our crop of fruit, figs, apples and grapes."

The priest listened to him with a surprise which all his politeness did not enable him to entirely hide.

"But, it won't take us long," Mouret continued. "If you don't mind waiting for ten minutes, Rose will get the rooms cleared for you."

A troubled expression passed over the priest's cadaverous face.

"The rooms are furnished, are they not?" he asked.

"Not at all; there isn't a bit of furniture in them. We have never occupied them."

Then the Abbé lost his self-control and his gray eyes flashed brightly as he exclaimed with suppressed indignation:

"But I gave distinct instructions in my letter that furnished rooms were to be taken. I could scarcely bring my furniture along with me in my trunk."

"Well, that just fits in with what I have been saying!" cried Mouret, in louder tones. "The way that Bourrette goes on is quite incredible. He certainly saw the apples when he came to look at the rooms, sir, for he took one of them up and remarked that he had rarely seen such a fine one. He said that everything seemed quite suitable and that the rooms were all that was necessary, and he took them."

The Abbé Faujas was no longer listening to Mouret, and his cheeks were flushed with anger. He turned round and said in a disturbed and broken voice:

"Do you hear, mother? There is no furniture."

The old lady, with her thin black shawl drawn tightly round her, had just been inspecting the ground-floor with little furtive steps, but without ever putting down her basket. She had gone up to the door of the kitchen and had scrutinized the four walls, and then, standing

on the steps that overlooked the terrace, she had taken in all the garden with a long, searching glance. But it was the dining-room that seemed to especially interest her, and she was now standing again in front of the table laid for dinner, and was watching the steam of the soup rise up, when her son repeated.

"Do you hear, mother? We shall have to go to the hotel."

She raised her head without making any reply; but the expression of her whole face seemed to speak a determination not to leave this house, with whose every corner she had already made herself acquainted.

Mouret, however, was beginning to grow impatient. As he saw that neither the mother nor her son seemed to have made up their minds to leave the place, he said:

"We have, unfortunately, no beds; but there is, in the loft, a folding-bed, which perhaps, at a pinch, madame might make do until to-morrow. But I really don't know how his reverence is to manage to sleep."

Then at last Madame Faujas opened her lips. She spoke in short and somewhat hoarse tones.

"My son will take the folding-bed. A mattress on the floor, in a corner, will be quite sufficient for me."

The Abbé signified his approval of this arrangement by nodding his head. Mouret was going to protest and try to think of some other way, but, seeing the satisfied appearance of his new tenants, he kept silence and merely exchanged a glance of astonishment with his wife.

"To-morrow, it will be light," he said, with his touch of middle-class banter, "and you will be able to furnish as you like. Rose will come up and clear away the fruit and make the beds. Will you wait for a few moments on the terrace? Come, children, bring a couple of chairs out."

Since the arrival of the priest and his mother, the young people had remained quietly seated at the table and had scrutinized them curiously. The Abbe had not appeared to notice them, but Madame Faujas had stopped for a moment before each of them and stared them keenly in the face as though she were trying to look into their young heads. As they heard their father's words, they all three hastened to rise and take out the chairs.

The old lady did not sit down; and when Mouret, losing sight of her, turned round to find out what had become of her, he saw her standing before one of the half-opened windows of the drawing-room. She craned out her neck and completed her inspection with all the calm deliberation of a person examining a property for sale. Just as Rose took up the little trunk she returned into the passage, and said quietly:

"I will come up and help you."

Then she went upstairs after the servant. The priest did not even turn his head; he was smiling at the three young people who were still standing in front of him. In spite of the hardness of his brow and the stern lines about his mouth, his face was capable of an expression of great gentleness, when he chose to assume it.

"Is this the whole of your family, madame?" he asked of Marthe, who had just come up to him.

"Yes, sir," she replied, feeling a little confused beneath the clear gaze which he bent upon her.

Looking again at her children, he continued:

"You've got two big lads there, who will soon be men. Have you finished your studies yet, my boy?"

It was Serge to whom he addressed this question. Mouret interrupted the lad as he was going to reply.

"Yes, he has finished," said the father; "though he is the younger of the two. When I say that he has finished,



I mean that he has taken his degree, for he is staying on at college for another year to go through a course of philosophy. He is the clever one of the family. His brother, the eldest, that great booby there, isn't up to much. He has been already plucked twice for his degree, but he still goes on idling his time away and is always larking about."

Octave listened to his father's reproaches with a smile, while Serge bent his head beneath his praises. Faujas seemed to be studying them for a moment in silence, and then, going up to Désirée and putting on his expression of gentle tenderness, he said to her:

"Will you allow me, mademoiselle, to be your friend?"

She made no reply but went, half afraid, to hide her face against her mother's shoulder. The latter, instead of making her uncover her face again, pressed her more closely to her, clasping her arm round her waist.

"Excuse her," she said with a touch of sadness, "she has not a very strong head and she has remained quite childish. She is weak-minded, and we do not trouble her by attempting to teach her anything. She is fourteen years old now, and she has learned nothing except a love for animals."

Désirée's confidence returned to her under her mother's caresses, and she lifted up her head and smiled. Then she said boldly:

"I should like you very much to be my friend; but you must promise me that you will never hurt the flies. Will you?"

And then, as every one about her began to smile, she added gravely:

"Octave crushes them, the poor flies. It is very wicked of him."

The Abbé Faujas sat down. He seemed very tired. He gave himself up for a moment or two to the cool



quietness of the terrace, and cast lingering glances over the garden and the neighboring trees.

"It is very pleasant here," he murmured.

Then he relapsed into silence, and seemed quite absorbed and lost in a reverie. He started slightly as Mouret said to him with a laugh:

"If you will allow us, sir, we will now go back to our dinner."

And then, catching a glance from his wife, his landlord added:

"You must come and sit down with us and have a plate of soup. It will save you the trouble of having to go to the hotel to dine. Don't make any difficulty, I beg."

"I am extremely obliged to you, but we really don't require anything," the Abbé replied in tones of excessive politeness, which allowed of no repetition of the invitation.

Then the Mourets returned to the dining-room and seated themselves round the table. Marthe served the soup and there was soon a cheerful clatter of spoons. The young people chattered merrily, and Désirée broke out into a peal of ringing laughter as she listened to a story her father, who was now in high glee at having at last got to his dinner, was telling. In the meantime, the Abbé Faujas, whom they had quite forgotten, remained sitting perfectly motionless upon the terrace, facing the setting sun. He did not even turn his head, and seemed to hear nothing of what was going on behind him. Just as the sun was disappearing he took off his hat, overcome by the heat. Marthe, who was sitting with her face to the window, could see his great bare head with its short hair that was already silvering about the temples. A last red ray was lighting up his stern soldier-like head, on which the tonsure lay like a cicatrized wound from the blow of a club; then the ray faded away and the priest,

now wrapped in shadow, was nothing more than a black outline against the ashy gray of the gloaming.

Not wishing to summon Rose, Marthe herself went to get a lamp and brought in the first dish. As she was returning from the kitchen, she met, at the foot of the staircase, a woman whom she did not at first recognize. It was Madame Faujas. She had put on a cotton cap and looked like a servant in her common print dress, with a yellow handkerchief crossed over her breast and knotted behind her waist. Her wrists were bared and she was still quite out of breath with the work she had been doing, and her heavy laced boots clattered on the flooring of the passage.

"Ah! you've got all put right now, have you, madame!" Marthe asked with a smile.

"Oh yes! it was a mere trifle and was done directly," Madame Faujas replied.

She went down the steps that led to the terrace, and in gentler tones she said:

"Ovide, my child, will you come upstairs now? Everything is quite ready."

She was obliged to go and lay her hand upon her son's shoulder to awaken him from his reverie. The air was growing sharp, and the Abbé shivered as he got up and followed his mother in silence. As he passed before the door of the dining-room that was all bright with the cheerful glow of the lamp and merry with the chatter of the young folks, he put his head inside and said in his flexible tones:

"Let me thank you again and beg you to excuse us for having so disturbed you. We are very sorry—"

"No! no!" cried Mouret, "it is we who are sorry and distressed at not being able to offer you better accommodation for the night."

The priest bowed and Marthe again met that clear

gaze of his, that eagle glance which had so affected her before. In the depths of his eyes, which were generally of a melancholy gray, passing flames seemed to gleam, like lamps carried behind the windows of some slumbering house.

"His eyes don't seem to be in any danger of growing dim yet," Mouret said, jokingly, when the mother and son had retired.

"I don't think they seem very well off," Marthe remarked.

"Well, at any rate, he isn't carrying Peru about with him in that box of his," Mouret exclaimed. "And it's so precious heavy, too! Why, I could have raised it up with the tip of my little finger!"

He was interrupted in his flow of chatter by Rose, who had just come running down the stairs to relate the extraordinary things she had witnessed.

"Well, she is a wonderful creature, indeed!" she cried, posting herself in front of the table at which the family were eating. "She's sixty-five at least, but she doesn't show it at all, and she bustles about, and works like a horse!"

"Did she help you to remove the fruit?" Mouret asked, with some curiosity.

"Yes, indeed, she did, sir! She carried it away in her apron, filling it with loads heavy enough to burst it. I kept saying to myself, 'It will certainly go this time,' but it didn't. It is made of good strong material, the same kind of material as I wear myself. We made at least ten journeys backward and forward, but she only grumbled, and complained that we were getting on very slowly. I really believe, begging your pardons for mentioning it, that I heard her swear."

Mouret appeared to be greatly amused.

"And the beds?" he asked.



"The beds, she made them too. It was quite a sight to see her turn the mattress over. It seemed to weigh nothing, I can tell you. And yet she is very careful and particular with it all. She tucked in the folding-bed as carefully as though she were preparing a baby's cradle. She couldn't have laid the sheet with greater devotion if the Infant Jesus Himself had been going to sleep there. She has put three out of the four blankets upon the folding bed. And it is just the same with the pillows; she has kept none for herself, but has given both to her son.

"She is going to sleep on the floor, then?"

"In a corner, just like a dog! She has thrown down a mattress on the floor of the other room, and says she will sleep there more soundly than if she were in paradise. She says that she is never cold, and that her head is much too hard to make her at all afraid of lying on the floor. I have taken them some sugar and some water, as madame told me. Oh, they really are the strangest people!"

Rose brought in the remainder of the dinner. That evening the Mourets discussed the new tenants at great length. In their life, which went on with all the even regularity of clock-work, the arrival of these two strangers was a very exciting event. Mouret was especially fond of indulging in the chattering gossip of a little provincial town. During dessert, as he leaned his elbows on the table in the cool dining-room, he repeated for the tenth time with the self-satisfied air of a well-to-do happy man:

"It certainly isn't a very handsome present that Besançon has made to Plassans! Did you notice the back of his cassock as he turned round? I shall be very much surprised if he is much run after by the pious folks here. He is too seedy and threadbare and the pious folks like well-looking priests."



"He has a very sweet voice," said Marthe indulgently.

"Not when he is angry, at any rate," Mouret replied. "Didn't you hear him when he burst out on finding that the rooms were not furnished? He is a hard, stern man, and not the sort, I should think, to go lounging in confessional-boxes. I shall be very curious to see how he sets about his furnishing, to-morrow. But as long as he pays me, I don't much mind anything else. If he doesn't, I shall apply to the Abbé Bourette. It was with him that I made the bargain."

It was not a devout family. The children themselves made fun of the Abbé and his mother. Octave burlesqued the old lady's ways of craning her neck to see to the end of the rooms, a performance which made Désirée laugh.

Serge, who was of a more serious turn of mind, stood up for "these poor people." As a rule, precisely at ten o'clock, if he was not playing at piquet, Mouret took up his candlestick and went off to bed, but this evening eleven o'clock had struck, and he was not yet feeling drowsy. Désirée had fallen asleep, with her head lying on Marthe's knees. The two lads had gone up to their room; and Mouret, left alone with his wife, was still gossiping on.

"How old do you suppose he is?" he asked suddenly.

"Who?" said Marthe, who was now beginning to feel very sleepy.

"Who? Why, the Abbé, of course! Between forty and forty-five, eh? He's a fine strapping fellow. It's a pity for him to be wearing a cassock! He would have made a splendid carbineer."

Then, after an interval of silence, he continued in a loud voice the reflections which were quite exercising his mind:

"They arrived by the quarter to seven train. They

must only have had just time to call on the Abbé Bourrette before coming on here. I dare wager that they haven't dined. That is quite clear. We should certainly have seen them if they had gone out to the hotel. Ah, now! I should very much like to know where they can have had anything to eat."

Rose had been lingering about in the dining-room for the last few moments, waiting till her master and mistress should go to bed that she might be at liberty to fasten the doors and windows.

"I know where they had something to eat," she said.

And as Mouret turned himself briskly toward her, she added:

"Yes, I had gone upstairs again to see if there was anything they wanted. As I heard no sound, I didn't venture to knock at the door, and I looked through the key-hole."

"But that was very improper of you, very improper," Marthe interrupted, severely. "You know very well, Rose, that I don't approve of anything of that kind."

"Leave her alone and let her go on!" cried Mouret, who, under other circumstances, would have been very angry with the inquisitive woman. "You looked through the key-hole, then?"

"Yes, sir; I thought it was the best plan?"

"Clearly so. What were they doing?"

"Well, sir, they were eating. I saw them sitting on the corner of the folding-bed and eating. The old lady had spread out a napkin. Every time that they helped themselves to the wine, they corked the bottle and laid it down against the pillow."

"But what were they eating?"

"I couldn't quite tell, sir. It seemed to me like the remains of a pie wrapped up in a newspaper. They had

some apples as well—little apples that looked good for nothing."

"They were talking, I suppose? Did you hear what they said?"

"No, sir; they were not talking. I stayed for a good quarter of an hour watching them, but they never said anything. They were much too busy eating!"

Marthe got up and woke Désirée, and made as though she were going off to bed. Her husband's curiosity vexed her. He, too, at last made up his mind to go up stairs, while old Rose, who was a pious creature, went on in lower tones:

"The poor, dear man must have been frightfully hungry. His mother handed him the biggest pieces and watched him swallow them with delight. And now, he will sleep in some nice white sheets; unless, indeed, the smell of the fruit keeps him awake. And there isn't a bit of furniture in the whole room, nothing but the bed in the corner! If I were he, I should feel quite frightened, and I should keep the light burning all night."

Mouret had taken up his candlestick. He stood for a moment before Rose, and summed up the events of the evening in these words:

"It is extraordinary!"

Then he joined his wife at the foot of the staircase. She had got into bed and had fallen asleep, while he was still continuing to listen to the slight sounds that proceeded from the upper floor. The Abbé's room was just over his own. He heard the window being gently opened, and this excited his curiosity extremely. He raised his head from his pillow and struggled strenuously against his increasing drowsiness, feeling very anxious to find out how long the Abbé would remain at the window. But sleep was too strong for him, and Mouret was snoring noisily before he had been able to catch



again the grating sound of the window-fastening.

Up above, the Abbé Faujas was gazing, bare-headed, out of his window into the black night, and absorbed in those thoughts which gave his brow such an expression of sternness. There was a touch of scorn in the way in which he stretched out his muscular neck, as he raised his head to gaze out upon the town that lay slumbering in the distance. The tall trees in the garden of the Sub-Prefecture formed a mass of gloomy darkness, and Monsieur Rastoil's pear-trees shot out their scraggy, twisted branches, while, further away, there was nothing but a sea of black shadow, a perfect blank nothingness, from which not a sound proceeded. The town lay as tranquilly asleep as an infant in its cradle.

The Abbé Faujas stretched out his arms with an air of ironic defiance, as though he would have liked to circle them round Plassans, and squeeze the life out of it by crushing it against his brawny chest, while he murmured to himself:

"Ah! the imbeciles, who laughed at me this evening, as they saw me going through their streets!"

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### III

Mouret spent the whole of the next morning in playing the spy over his new tenant. Henceforth he would have an occupation, an amusement which would relieve the monotony of his everyday life. As he had often said, he was not partial to priests, and the first one who had entered into his existence excited in him an extraordinary amount of interest. Although Mouret was a strong-minded man and professed himself to be a follower of Voltaire, in the Abbé's presence he felt a touch of uneasiness mingled with a strong feeling of curiosity.



Not a sound came from the second floor. Mouret stood on the staircase and listened eagerly, and he even ventured to go to the loft. As he hushed his steps when passing along the passage, a pattering of slippers behind the door filled him with great excitement. Not succeeding in making any new discovery, he went down into the garden and strolled into the arbor at the end of it, raising his eyes and trying to look through the windows and find out what was going on in the rooms. But he could not see even the Abbé's shadow. Madame Faujas, in the absence of curtains, had, as a make-shift, fastened up some sheets behind the windows.

At breakfast Mouret seemed quite vexed.

"Are they dead upstairs?" he said, as he cut the children's bread. "Have you heard them move, Marthe?"

"No, my dear; but I haven't been listening."

Rose cried out from the kitchen:

"They've been gone out ever so long. They'll be far enough away now if they've kept on at the same pace."

Mouret summoned the cook and questioned her minutely.

"They went out, sir; first the mother and then the priest. They were walking so softly that I should never have known anything about it if their shadows had not fallen across the kitchen floor when they opened the door. I looked out into the street to see where they were going, but they had vanished. They must have gone off in a hurry."

"It is very surprising. But where was I at the time?"

"I think you were in the garden, sir, looking at the grapes on the arbor."

Mouret, contrary to his usual custom, resolved to remain at home. He pottered up and down between the dining-room and the garden, poking about and pretending that nothing was in its place and that the house

simply invited thieves. Then he got indignant with Serge and Octave, who had set off for college, he said, quite half an hour too soon.

"Isn't father going out?" Désirée whispered in her mother's ear. "He will worry us all to death if he stays at home."

Marthe hushed her. At last Mouret went away, quite distressed that he could not remain and see what happened.

When he returned in the evening he was all on fire with curiosity.

"Well, what about the Abbé?" he asked, without giving himself time to take off his hat.

Marthe was working in her usual place on the terrace.

"The Abbé!" she repeated, with an appearance of surprise. "Oh, yes! the Abbé—I've really seen nothing of him, but I believe he has got settled down now. Rose told me that some furniture had come."

"That's just what I was afraid of!" exclaimed Mouret. "I wanted to be here when it came; for, you see, the furniture is my security. I knew quite well that you would never think of stirring from your chair. Rose! Rose!"

When the cook appeared in answer to his summons, he said to her:

"There's some furniture come for the people on the second floor?"

"Yes, sir; it came in a little covered cart. I recognized it as Bergasse's, the second-hand dealer's. It wasn't a big load. Madame Faujas came on behind it. I dare say she had been giving the man who pushed it along a helping hand up the Rue Balande."

"At any rate, you saw the furniture, I suppose? Did you notice what there was?"

"Certainly, sir. I had posted myself by the door,

and it all went past me, which didn't seem to please Madame Faujas very much. First of all they brought up an iron bedstead, then a chest of drawers, then two tables and four chairs; and that was the whole lot of it. And it wasn't new, either. I wouldn't have given ninety francs for the whole collection."

"But you should have told madame; we cannot let the rooms under such conditions. I will go at once and talk to the Abbé Bourrette about the matter."

He was fuming with irritation and was just setting off, when Marthe brought him to a sudden halt by saying:

"Oh! I had forgotten to tell you. They have paid me six months' rent in advance."

"What! They have paid you?" he stammered out, almost in a tone of annoyance.

"Yes, the old lady came down and gave me this."

She put her hand into her work-bag, and gave her husband seventy-five francs in hundred-sou-pieces, neatly wrapped up in a piece of newspaper. Mouret counted the money as he said:

"As long as they pay, they are quite free to stay. But they are strange folks, all the same. Everyone can't be rich, of course; but that is no reason why one should behave in this suspicious manner, when one's poor."

"There is something else I have to tell you," Marthe continued, as she saw him calmed down. "The old lady asked me if we were disposed to part with the folding-bed to her. I told her that she was welcome to keep it as long as she liked."

"You did quite right. We must do what we can to oblige them. As I have told you before, what bothers me about these confounded priests is that one never can tell what they are thinking about, or what they are up to. Apart from that, you will often find very honorable men amongst them."



The money seemed to have consoled him. He joked and teased Serge about his book on the Chinese missions, which the boy happened to be reading just then. During dinner, he affected to feel no longer any curiosity about the tenants of the second floor; but, when Octave mentioned that he had seen the Abbé Faujas leaving the Bishop's residence, Mouret could not restrain himself any further. When the dessert was put on the table he recommenced his talk of the previous evening, though afterward he began to feel a little ashamed of himself.

"After all," he said, as he went off to bed, "one has no business to go prying into other people's affairs. The Abbé is quite at liberty to do as he pleases. It is getting wearisome to be always talking about these people, and I, for my part, shall say nothing more about them, now."

A week passed away. Mouret had resumed his habitual course of life. He prowled about the house, lectured his children, and spent his afternoons away from home, amusing himself by transacting various bits of business, of which he never spoke, and he ate and slept like a man for whom life is an easy down-hill journey, without any jolts or surprises of any kind. The whole place sank back into all its old monotony. Marthe occupied her accustomed place on the terrace, with her little work-table in front of her. Désirée played by her side. The two lads came home at the usual times, with all their old noisy behavior; and Rose, the cook, grumbled and growled at everyone; while the garden and the dining-room retained all their wonted sleepy calm.

Mouret occasionally raised his eyes toward the second-floor windows, which Madame Faujas had hung with thick cotton curtains, on the day after her arrival. They were never opened. They had a sanctimonious, conventual



look about their stern, cold folds, and they seemed to tell of a deep, unbroken silence, and a cloisteral stillness lurking behind them. At distant intervals the windows were slightly opened, and allowed the high, shadowy ceilings to be seen between the snowy whiteness of the curtains. But it was all to no purpose that Mouret kept up his watch; he never could catch sight of the hand which opened or closed them, and he never even heard the grating of the fastening. Never a sound of human life came down from the second floor.

At the end of the first week, Mouret had not had another glimpse of the Abbé Faujas. In spite of all the efforts he made to appear quite indifferent, he relapsed into his old questionings and inquiries.

"Have you seen anything of him?" he asked his wife.

"I fancy I caught a glimpse of him yesterday, as he was coming in, but I am not sure. His mother always wears a black dress, and it might have been she that I saw."

And as he continued to press her with questions, she began to tell him all she knew.

"Rose says that he goes out every day, and stays away a long time. As for his mother, she is as regular as a clock. She comes down at seven o'clock in the morning to go out and do her marketing. She has a big basket, which is always closed, in which she must bring everything back with her, coal, bread, wine and provisions, for no tradesman ever comes with anything for them. They are very courteous and polite; and Rose says that they always bow to her when they meet her. But generally, however, she does not even hear them come down the stairs."

"They must go in for a funny kind of cooking up there," said Mouret, to whom all these details conveyed none of the information he wanted.

Another evening, when Octave had mentioned that he

had seen the Abbé Faujas entering Saint-Saturnin's, his father asked him about the priest's appearance, and what effect he had upon the passers-by, and what he could be going to do in the church.

"Ah! you are really much too curious!" cried the young man, with a laugh. "He didn't look very striking in the sunshine with his rusty cassock, I can vouch for that much. I noticed, too, that, as he walked along, he kept in the shadow of the houses, which made his cassock look a little blacker. There were two girls who began to laugh as he crossed the Place. The Abbé raised his head and looked at them with an expression of great softness—didn't he, Serge?"

Then Serge related how he had several times, as he was returning from college, followed the Abbé at a distance on his way back from Saint-Saturnin's. He passed through the streets without speaking to anyone; and he seemed not to know a single soul, and appeared hurt by the suppressed titters and jeers which he heard around him.

"Do they talk of him, then, in the town?" asked Mouret, whose interest was greatly aroused.

"No one has ever spoken to me about him," Octave replied.

"Yes," said Serge, "they do talk of him. The Abbé Bourrette's nephew told me that he wasn't a favorite at the church. They are not fond of these priests who come from a distance; and then he has such a miserable appearance."

Then Marthe advised the two young fellows not to satisfy any outside curiosity about the Abbé.

"Oh, yes! they may answer any questions," Mouret exclaimed. "Certainly nothing that we know of him could be likely to compromise him in any way."

From this time forward, with the best faith in the

world and without meaning the least harm, Mouret turned his sons into a couple of spies over the priest. But the information that was to be derived from gossip was a stream that was quickly dried up, and the town appeared to have extended its pardon to "the poor fellow," who glided about in the shadow in such a rusty old cassock, and its only feeling for him was now one of disdain. The priest, on the other hand, went straight to the cathedral and so returned from it, always passing through the same streets. Octave said, laughingly, that he was sure he was counting the paving-stones.

In the house, Mouret bethought himself of engaging the help of Désirée, who never went out, in collecting information. In the evening he used to take her off to the bottom of the garden and listen to her chatter about what she had done and what she had seen during the day, and he tried to lead her on to the topic of the tenants of the second floor.

"Now, just listen to what I tell you," he said to her one day. "To-morrow, when the window is open, just throw your ball into the room, and then go up and ask for it."

The next day the girl threw her ball into the room, but she had scarcely reached the steps of the house before the ball, returned by an invisible hand, bounced up from the terrace. Her father, who had reckoned on the child's taking ways bringing about a renewal of the intercourse which had been interrupted since the first day, now lost all hope. It was quite clear that the Abbé had completely made up his mind to keep himself to himself. This rebuff, however, only made Mouret's curiosity all the keener. He even condescended to go gossiping in corners with the cook, to the great displeasure of Marthe, who reproached him for his want of self respect;



but he only got angry with her and defended himself by lies. However, as he felt he was in the wrong, it was only in secret that he henceforth talked to Rose about the Faujases.

One morning she beckoned to him to follow her into the kitchen.

"Oh, sir!" she said, as she shut the door, "I have been watching for your coming down from your room for more than an hour."

"Have you found something out?"

"Well, you shall hear. Yesterday evening I was talking to Madame Faujas for more than an hour!"

A thrill of joy passed through Mouret. He sat down on an old tattered rush-bottom kitchen chair, in the midst of all the litter and disorder of the previous day.

"Go long! make haste!" he said.

"Well," continued the cook, "I was at the street-door saying good-night to Monsieur Rastoil's servant, when Madame Faujas came down-stairs to empty a pail of dirty water in the gutter. Instead of immediately going back again, without even turning her head round, as she generally does, she stopped there for a moment to look at me. Then it struck me that she wanted to speak to me, and I said to her that it had been a beautiful day and that it would be good for the grapes. She said, 'Yes, yes,' in an unconcerned sort of way, but she put down her pail and made no attempt to go away; she even came and leaned her back against the wall by my side—"

"Well! well! what did she say to you?" cried Mouret.

"Well, of course, I wasn't silly enough to begin to question her. She would have gone straight off if I had. The Curé of Saint-Saturnin's, that worthy Monsieur Compan, happened to be passing and I told her that he was very ill and that he wasn't long for this world, and



that there would be a very great difficulty in filling up his place at the cathedral. She was all ears at once, I can tell you. She even asked me what was the matter with Monsieur Compan. Then, I gradually got talking about our bishop. Monseigneur Rousselot was a most excellent and worthy man, I told her. She did not know his age, so I told her that he was sixty, very delicate also, and that he let himself be led by the nose. There is a good deal of talk about the vicar-general, Monsieur Fenil, who is all powerful with the bishop. The old lady was quite interested, and she would have stayed out there in the street all night."

An expression of utter disgust passed over Mouret's face. "All this that you're telling me is what you said yourself," he cried. "What was it that she said? That's what I want to hear."

"Wait a little and let me finish," Rose replied very calmly. "I was gradually gaining my purpose. To win her confidence, I ended by talking to her about ourselves. I told her that you were Monsieur Francois Mouret, a retired merchant from Marseilles, who had managed in fifteen years, to make a fortune out of wines and oils and almonds. I added that you had preferred to come and settle down and live on your means in Plassans, a quiet town, where your wife's relations lived. I even contrived to let her know, too, that madame was your cousin, that you were forty years old and she was thirty-seven, and that you lived very happily together; in fact, I told her all about you. She seemed to be very much interested and kept saying, 'Yes, yes,' in her deliberate way; and, when I stopped for a moment, she nodded her head as though to tell me she was listening and that I might go on. We went on talking in this way, with our backs against the wall, like a couple of old friends, till it was quite dark."

Mouret bounced up from his chair in angry indignation.

"What!" he cried, "is that all? She led you on to gossip to her for an hour, and she herself told you nothing!"

"When it got dark, she said to me: 'The air is becoming quite chilly.' And then she took up her pail and went back up-stairs."

"You are nothing but an idiot! That old woman up there is more than a match for half a score such as you. Ah! they'll be laughing finely now that they have wormed out of you all that they want to know about us! Do you hear me, Rose? I tell you that you are nothing but an idiot!"

The old cook waxed very indignant, and she began to bounce excitedly up and down the kitchen, knocking the pots and pans about noisily, and crumpling up the dusters and then flinging them down.

"It was scarcely worth your while, sir," she hissed out, "to come into my kitchen to call me insulting names. You had better take yourself off. What I did, I did to please you. If madame finds us here together talking about these people, she will be angry with me, and quite rightly, because it is wrong for us to be doing so. I did as any one else would have done under the same circumstances. I talked and told her about your affairs, and it was no fault of mine that she didn't tell me about hers. Go and ask her about them yourself, since you are anxious to know about them. Perhaps you won't make such an idiot of yourself as I have done."

She had raised her voice, and was talking so loudly that Mouret thought it would be more prudent to retire, and he closed the kitchen-door after him to prevent his wife hearing her. But Rose pulled it open again directly he had passed out, and cried out after him in the passage:

"I'll bother myself about it no longer; do you hear?"

"You may get somebody else to do your underhand business for you!"

Mouret was quite vanquished. He showed some irritation at his defeat, and tried to console himself by saying that these second-floor tenants of his were mere nobodies. Gradually he succeeded in making this opinion of his own that of his acquaintances, and then that of the whole town. The Abbé Faujas came to be looked upon as a priest without means and without ambition, and completely outside the pale of the intrigues of the diocese. People imagined that he was ashamed of his poverty, that he was glad to perform any unpleasant duties in connection with the cathedral, and that he tried to keep himself in the obscurity of the shade as much as possible. There was only one matter of curiosity left in connection with him, and that was the reason of his having come to Plassans from Besancon. Queer stories were circulated about him, but they all seemed very improbable. Mouret himself, who had played the spy over his tenants simply for amusement and to pass the time, just as he would have played a game of cards or bowls, was beginning to forget that he had a priest living in his house, when an event happened which greatly excited him.

One afternoon as he was returning home, he saw the Abbé Faujas in front of him, going up the Rue Balande. Mouret slackened his pace and examined him at his leisure. Although the priest had been lodging in his house for a month, this was the first time that he had thus seen him in broad daylight. The Abbé still wore his old cassock; he was walking slowly, with his hat in his hand and his head bare in spite of the chilly air. The street, which was a very steep one, with its big, bare houses always closed, was quite deserted. Mouret, who had begun to quicken his pace again, was obliged

to walk on the tips of his toes for fear the priest should hear him and make his escape. But as they neared Monsieur Rastoil's house, a group of people turning out of the Place of the Sub-Prefecture entered it. The Abbé Faujas made a slight detour to avoid these persons. He watched the door close, and then suddenly stopping he turned round toward his landlord who was now close up to him.

"I am very glad to have happened to meet you just now," he said with his excessive politeness, "otherwise I should have ventured to disturb you this evening. The last time it rained the wet came through the ceiling to my room and I want you to come and look at it."

Mouret remained standing in front of him and stammered out in confusion that he was entirely at the Abbé's service. And then, as they went in together, he asked him at what time he should come and look at the ceiling.

"I should like you to come at once," the Abbé said, "if it wouldn't be troubling you too much."

Mouret went up the stairs after him, almost choking with excitement, while Rose followed them with her eyes from the kitchen-door quite dazed with astonishment.

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#### IV

When Mouret reached the second floor, he was more excited than a youth who is for the first time entering a woman's bedroom. The Abbé Faujas slipped the key, which he quite concealed in his big fingers, into the lock without the slightest sound, and the door opened as silently as if it were hung upon hinges of velvet. Then the Abbé, stepping back, mutely motioned to Mouret to enter.



The cotton curtains in the two windows were so heavy that the room lay in a pale, chalky dimness like the half-light of a cell. It was a very large room, with a lofty ceiling, and a quiet and neat wall-paper of a faded yellow. Mouret ventured into the room, advancing with short steps over the floor, which was as smooth and shiny as a mirror, and the coldness of which he seemed to feel striking through the soles of his boots. He glanced furtively round him and examined the curtainless iron bedstead, with its sheets so straightly stretched that it looked like a block of white stone lying in the corner. The chest of drawers, stowed away at the other end of the room, a little table in the middle and two chairs, one before each window, completed the furniture. There was not a single paper on the table, not an article of any kind on the chest of drawers, and not a garment hanging against the walls. Everything was perfectly bare. Over the chest of drawers there hung a great Christ carved in black wood, whose gloomy cross was all that broke the somber nakedness of the room.

"Come this way, sir, will you?" said the Abbé. "It is in this corner that the ceiling is stained."

But Mouret did not hurry himself; he was quite happy where he was. Although he saw none of the extraordinary things he had vaguely expected to see, there seemed to him to be a peculiar exhalation and odor about the room. It smelt of a priest, he thought; of a man with different ways from other men; of one who blows out his candle when he is going to change his shirt, and who never leaves his drawers or his razors lying about. The room was just like its provoking occupant, silent, cold and inscrutable. He was extremely surprised not to find, as he had expected to do, any appearance of poverty. The great Christ seemed to fill it with His black arms.

Mouret felt, however, that he must go and look at the corner which the Abbé Faujas was inviting him to inspect.

"You see the stain, don't you?" the priest asked. "It has faded a little since yesterday."

Mouret craned himself up on the tips of his toes and strained his eyes, but he could see nothing; though, when the Abbé had drawn back the curtains, he was able to distinguish a slight damp-stain.

"It's nothing very serious," he said.

"Oh no! but I thought it was better to tell you of it. The wet must have soaked in near the edge of the roof."

Mouret made no further remark; he was examining the room, which was now lying clear and distinct in the full day-light. There was not even a grain of dust lying about to tell aught of the Abbé's life.

"Perhaps," continued the priest, "we may be able to discover the place from the window."

He proceeded to open the window, but Mouret said that the workmen would easily be able to find the leak.

"I know that landlords like to know how matters are going on," said the Abbé. "Inspect everything, I beg of you. The house is yours."

As he uttered this last sentence he smiled, a thing he did but rarely; and then as Mouret and himself leaned over the bar that crossed the window and turned their eyes toward the spout, he launched out into a flow of technical details, and tried to account for the appearance of the stain.

"I think there has been a slight depression of the tiles, perhaps even a breakage; unless, indeed, that crack which you can see up there in the cornice extends into the retaining-wall."

"Yes, yes, that is very possible," Mouret replied; "but I must confess, your reverence, that I really don't

understand anything about these matters. However, the bricklayer will see to it."

The priest said nothing further on the subject, but remained where he was quietly gazing out upon the garden beneath him. Mouret was quite won over when his tenant, after an interval of silence, said to him in his soft voice:

"You have a very pretty garden, sir."

"Oh! it's nothing out of the common," he replied. "There used to be some fine trees which I was obliged to have cut down, for nothing would grow in their shade. This plot is quite large enough for us and keeps us in vegetables all through the season."

The Abbé seemed surprised, and asked Mouret for detailed explanations. The garden was an old-fashioned country garden, surrounded with arbors, and divided into four regular square compartments by tall borders of box. In the middle there was a shallow basin, but there was no fountain. Only a single one of the squares was devoted to flowers. In the other three, which were planted at the corners with fruit-trees, there was a crop of magnificent cabbages and other vegetables. The paths of yellow gravel were kept in a state of the most precise neatness. Mouret complained of the difference of level which allowed the rain-water from the Sub-Prefecture garden to run over his own patches of cultivated ground.

The priest seemed to be listening out of mere complaisance, just nodding his head occasionally but making no remarks. He followed with his eyes the indicating motions of his landlord's hands.

"There is still another inconvenience," continued the latter. "You see that narrow road between the two walls? It is called the Impasse des Chevillottes. It is a blind-alley leading to a cart-entrance to the grounds of the Sub-Prefecture. All the neighboring properties



have little doors giving access to the alley, and there are endless mysterious comings and goings. I, who am a family man with children, have had my door fastened up with a couple of stout nails."

He looked at the Abbé and winked his eyes, but the Abbé just glanced at the alley without showing any curiosity on the subject. Then he continued again to gaze placidly down upon the Mourets' garden. Marthe was in her customary place near the edge of the terrace, hemming napkins. She had raised her head sharply on first hearing voices, and then resumed her work again, full of surprise at seeing her husband at one of the second-floor windows in the company of the priest. She appeared now to be quite unconscious of their presence.

They were both silent again, and the Abbé Faujas still seemed disinclined to leave the window. He now appeared to be examining their neighbor's flower-beds. Monsieur Rastoil's garden was arranged after the English fashion, with little walks and grass-plots broken by small flower-beds. At the bottom there was a round cluster of trees, underneath which were set a table and some rustic chairs.

"Monsieur Rastoil is very rich," resumed Mouret, who had followed the direction of the Abbé's eyes. "His garden costs him a large sum of money. There isn't a vegetable about the place; nothing but flowers. At one time the ladies even talked about cutting down the fruit trees; but that would really have been wicked, for the pears are magnificent specimens. Well, I suppose a man has a right to lay out his garden to please his own fancy, if he can afford to do it."

Then, as the Abbé still continued silent, he continued:

"You know Monsieur Rastoil, don't you? Every morning he walks about under his trees from eight o'clock



till nine. He is a heavy man, rather short, bald and clean shaven, and his head is as round as a ball. He reached his sixtieth birthday at the beginning of last August, I believe. He has been president of our civil tribunal for nearly twenty years. They say he is a very good fellow, but I see very little of him. 'Good morning,' and 'Good evening,' and that's about all that ever passes between us."

He stopped speaking as he saw several people coming down the steps of the neighboring house and making their way to the arbor of trees.

"Ah yes!" he resumed, lowering his voice, "to-day's Tuesday. There is a dinner party at the Rastoils'.

The Abbé had not been able to refrain from moving slightly, and had stooped a little to see better. A couple of priests who were walking by the side of two tall girls seemed to specially interest him.

"Do you know who those gentlemen are?" Mouret asked him.

And, when the priest only replied by a vague gesture, he added:

"They were crossing the Rue Balande just as we met each other. The tall and younger one—the one who is walking between Monsieur Rastoil's two daughters—is the Abbé Surin, our bishop's secretary. He is said to be a very amiable young man. The old one, who is walking a little behind, is one of our chief clergy, the Abbé Fenil. He is the head of the Seminary. He is a terrible man, flat and sharp as a saber. I wish he would turn round so that you might see his eyes. I am quite surprised that you don't know those gentlemen."

"I go out very little," said the Abbe, "and there is no house in the town that I visit."

"Ah! that isn't wise of you. You must often feel very dull. To do you justice, your reverence, you certainly

are not of a curious disposition. Just fancy! you've been here a month and you didn't even know that Monsieur Rastoil had a dinner party every Tuesday. Why, it's right before your eyes there from this window!"

Mouret laughed slightly. He was feeling a rather contemptuous opinion of the Abbé. Then in confidential tones he added:

'You see that tall old man who is with Madame Rastoil—the thin one I mean, with broad brims to his hat? Well, that is Monsieur de Bourdeu, the former prefect of the Drome, a prefect who was turned out of office by the revolution of 1848. He's another one that you don't know, I'll be bound. And Monsieur Maffre there, the magistrate, that white-headed old gentleman who is coming on the last with Monsieur Rastoil, don't you know him? Well, that is really inexcusable. He is an honorary vestry-man of Saint-Saturnin's. Between ourselves, he is accused of having killed his wife with his harshness and miserliness."

He stopped short and looked the Abbé in the face and said to him suddenly with a smile

"I beg your reverence's pardon, but I am not a very devout person."

The Abbé again made a vague movement of his hand, a movement which did duty as an answer:

"No, I am not a very devout person," Mouret repeated smilingly. "Every one must be left free, mustn't he? The Rastoils, now, are a religious family. You must have seen the mother and daughters at Saint Saturnin's. They are parishioners of yours. Ah! those poor girls! The elder, Angeline, is fully twenty-six years old, and the other one, Aurélie, is going on twenty-four. And they're no beauties either—quite yellow and shrewish looking. They wouldn't let the younger one marry till her elder sister has got off, but I dare say they'll end by

finding husbands somewhere for the sake of their dowry. Their mother there, that fat little woman who looks as innocent and mild as a sheep, has given poor Rastoil some pretty experiences."

He winked his left eye, a common habit of his when he indulged in any slightly broad pleasantry. The Abbé lowered his eyes, expecting Mouret to explain himself, but, as he remained silent, he raised them again and watched the company in the garden seat themselves round the table under the trees.

Mouret resumed his explanatory remarks.

"They will stay out there, enjoying the fresh air, till dinner time. It is just the same every Tuesday. That Abbé Surin is a great favorite. Look how he is laughing there with Mademoiselle Aurélie. Ah! the Abbé Fenil has observed us. What eyes he has got! He isn't very fond of me, as I've had a dispute with a relation of his. But where has the Abbé Bourrette got to? We haven't seen anything of him, have we? It is very extraordinary. He never misses Monsieur Rastoil's Tuesdays. He must be ill. You know him, don't you? What a worthy man he is! A most devoted servant of God!"

The Abbé Faujas was not listening to him any longer. His eyes were constantly meeting those of the Abbé Fenil. He bore the priest's scrutiny with perfect unconcern and never diverted his glance. He had leant himself more fully against the iron bar, and his eyes seemed to have grown bigger.

"Ah! here come the young people!" Mouret resumed, as three young men arrived on the scene. "The oldest one is Rastoil's son; he has just been called to the bar. The two others are the magistrate's sons; they are still at college. By the bye, I wonder why those two young scamps of mine haven't come back yet."



At that very moment Octave and Serge made their appearance on the terrace. They leant their backs against the balustrade and began to tease Désirée, who had just sat down by her mother's side. As the young folks caught sight of their father at the second-floor window, they lowered their voices and smothered their laughter.

"There, you see all my little family!" said Mouret complaisantly. "We stay at home, we do; and we have no visitors. Our garden is a closed paradise, where the devil can't enter to tempt us."

He smiled as he spoke, for he was really amusing himself at the Abbé's expense. The latter had slowly brought his eyes to bear upon the group under the window, his landlord's family. He gazed at them for a moment and then looked round upon the old-fashioned garden with its beds of vegetables surrounded with borders of box; and then he again turned his eyes to Monsieur Rastoil's pretentious grounds, and last of all, as though he wanted to get the plan of the whole neighborhood into his head, he turned his attention to the garden of the Sub-Prefecture, and at last he said:

"These gardens are quite lively. There are guests, too, in the one on the left."

Mouret raised his eyes.

"Oh, yes!" he said, unconcernedly, "it's like that every afternoon. They are the friends of Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies, our sub-prefect. In the summer time they meet in the same way in the evenings round the basin on the left, which you can't see from here. Ah! Monsieur de Condamin has got back! That fine old man there, who is so well preserved and has such a bright color; he is our conservator of rivers and forests; a jovial old fellow, who is constantly to be seen gloved and tightly breeched, on horseback. And the tales he can tell, too! He doesn't belong to this neighborhood,



and he has lately married a very young woman. However, that's fortunately no business of mine!"

He bent down his head again as he heard Désirée, who was playing with Serge, break out into one of her childish laughs. But the Abbé, whose face was colored with a slight flush recalled his attention, as he asked:

"Is that the sub-prefect, that fat gentleman with the white tie?"

This question seemed to amuse Mouret exceedingly.

"Oh, no!" he replied with a laugh. "It is very evident that you don't know Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies. He isn't forty and he's a tall, handsome, and very distinguished-looking young man. That fat gentleman is Doctor Porquier, the fashionable medical man of Plassans. He is a very well-to-do man, I can assure you, and he has only one trouble, his son Guillaume. Do you see those two people who are sitting on the bench with their backs turned toward us? They are Monsieur Paloque, the judge, and his wife. They are the ugliest couple in the neighborhood. It is difficult to say which is the worse looking, the husband or the wife. Fortunately they have no children."

Mouret began to laugh loudly; he was growing warm and excited, and he kept striking the window bar with his hand; he drew closer to the Abbé like some old gossip who is just going to launch out into a long story.

"Plassans is a very curious place from a political point of view. The Coup d'Etat succeeded here because the town is conservative. But first of all it is Legitimist and Orleanist; so much so indeed, that at the commencement of the Empire, it made special claims for itself. As these were disregarded, the town grew annoyed and went over to the opposition; yes, your reverence, to the opposition. Last year we elected for our deputy the Marquis de Lagrifoul, an old nobleman of mediocre

abilities, but one whose election was a very bitter pill to the Sub-Prefecture.—Ah, look! your reverence; there is Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies! He is with the mayor, Monsieur Delangre."

The Abbé looked keenly in the direction indicated by Mouret. The sub-prefect a very dark man, was smiling beneath his waxed mustaches. He was irreproachably dressed, and his whole appearance bespoke the fashionable officer and urbane administrator. The mayor was at his side, talking and gesticulating very rapidly. He was a short man, with square shoulders, and a sunken face that was rather Punch-like in appearance. "Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies," continued Mouret, "felt so confident of the return of the official candidate that the result of the election nearly made him ill. It was very amusing. On the evening of the election, the garden of the Sub-Prefecture was as dark and gloomy as a cemetery, while in the Rastoils' grounds there were lamps and candles burning under the trees, and joyous laughter and a perfect uproar of triumph. There was nothing that could be seen from the street, but they threw off all restraint in the garden, and gave full vent to their feelings. Oh, yes! I see singular things sometimes, though I don't say anything about them."

He checked himself for a moment, as though he was unwilling to say anything more, but his itching to gossip was too strong for him.

"I wonder what course they will take now at the Sub-Prefecture?" he continued. "They will never again get their candidate elected. They don't understand the people about here, and they are very weak. I was told that Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies was to have had a prefecture if the election had gone off all right. Ah! he will remain a sub-prefect for a long time yet, I imagine! What stratagem will they have recourse to, I wonder,

to overthrow the marquis? 'They will certainly have recourse to one of some kind or other, and do their best somehow to effect the conquest of Plassans.'

He turned his eyes upon the Abbe, from whom he had been looking away for the last moment or two, and he checked himself suddenly as he caught sight of the priest's eagerly attentive face and glistening eyes, and ears that seemed to have grown bigger.

"But, after all, I really know nothing about it. People tell so many ridiculous stories. All I care about is to be allowed to live quietly in my own house."

The Abbé continued to glance alternately at the two gardens on his right and left, in his calm, unconcerned manner, and he did not make the least attempt to induce Mouret to go on talking. The latter was beginning to wish, with a feeling of impatience, that his wife or one of his children would call to him to come into the garden, and he was greatly relieved when he saw Rose appear on the steps outside the house. She raised her head toward him.

"Well, sir!" she cried; "aren't you coming at all to-day? The soup has been on the table for the last quarter of an hour!"

"All right, Rose! I'll be down directly," he replied.

Then he made his apologies to the Abbé, and left the window. The chilly look of the room, which he had forgotten while his back had been turned to it, added to the confusion he was feeling. It seemed to him like a huge confessional-box with its awful black Christ which must have heard everything he had said. When the Abbé took leave of him with a silent bow, he stepped back again, and raising his eyes to the ceiling, he said:

"It is in that corner, then?"

"What is?" asked the Abbe in surprise.

"The stain that you spoke to me about."



The priest could not suppress a smile, and he again went and pointed out the stain to Mouret.

"Ah! I can see it quite plainly now," the latter said. "Well, I'll send the workmen up to-morrow."

Then at last he left the room, and before he had reached the end of the landing, the door was noiselessly closed after him. And as he went down the steps he muttered:

"The confounded fellow! He gets everything out of one without asking a single question!"

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## V

The next morning old Madame Rougon, Marthe's mother, came to pay a visit to the Mourets. It was a very unusual occurrence, as there was a coolness between Mouret and his wife's relations, which had increased since the election of the Marquis de Lagrifoul, whose success the latter attributed to Mouret's influence in the rural districts. Marthe used to go alone when she went to see her relations. Her mother, "that Black Félicité," as she was called, had retained at sixty-six years of age all the slimness and vivacity of a young girl. She always wore silk dresses, crowded with flounces, and was especially partial to yellows and drabs.

When she entered the dining-room there was no one there but Marthe and Mouret.

"Hallo!" cried the latter in great surprise, as he saw her coming, "here's your mother! I wonder what she's come for? She was here less than a month ago. She's scheming after something or other, I know."

The Rougons, whose assistant Mouret had been before his marriage, when their shabby little shop in the old quarter of the town seemed to speak of nothing but



bankruptcy, were the objects of his continual suspicion. They returned the feeling by a bitter and deep-seated animosity, their rancor being especially aroused by the speedy success which had attended him in business. When their son-in-law said, "I owe my fortune to nothing but my own exertions and hard work," they bit their lips and understood quite well that he was accusing them of having gained theirs by less honorable means. Notwithstanding the fine house she had on the place of the Sub-Prefecture, Felicité silently envied the peaceful little home of the Mourets, with all the bitter jealousy of a retired shop-keeper who owed her fortune to something else than the profits of her business.

Felicité kissed Marthe on the forehead and then gave her hand to Mouret. She and her son-in-law generally affected a bantering tone, half-joking and half-serious in their conversations together.

"Well," she said to him with a smile, "the gendarmes haven't been for you yet then, you revolutionist?"

"No, not yet," he replied with a responsive smile; "they are waiting till your husband gives the order."

"It's very nice and polite of you to say that!" exclaimed Felicité, whose eyes were beginning to glisten.

Marthe turned a beseeching glance upon Mouret. He had gone too far; but his feelings were roused and he added:

"Good gracious! What are we thinking of to be receiving you in the dining-room? Let us go into the drawing-room, I beg of you."

This was one of his usual pleasantries. He affected all Felicité's fine airs when he received a visit from her.

It was to no purpose that Marthe protested that they were very comfortable where they were; her husband insisted upon her and her mother following him into the drawing-room. When they got there, he bustled about,

opening the shutter and drawing out the chairs. The drawing-room, which was seldom entered, and the shutters of which were generally kept closed, was a great wilderness of a room, with its furniture swathed in white dust-covers which were turning yellow from the dampness of the garden. "It is really disgraceful!" muttered Mouret wiping the dust from a small console-table; "that wretched Rose neglects everything abominably."

Then, turning toward his mother-in-law, he said with ill-concealed irony:

"You will excuse us for receiving you in this way in our poor dwelling. We cannot all be wealthy."

Félicité was choking with rage. She looked keenly at Mouret for a moment and was on the point of breaking out in a burst of anger; but she made an effort to restrain herself and slowly dropped her eyes; and when she again raised them she began to speak in soft and pleasant tones.

"I have just been calling upon Madame de Condamin," she said, "and I thought I would look in here and see how you all were. The children are well, I hope, and you, too, my dear Mouret?"

"Yes, we are all wonderfully well," he replied, quite astonished at all this amiability.

The old lady gave him no time to import any fresh source of unpleasantness into the conversation, for she immediately began to question Marthe affectionately about all sorts of trifles, and played the part of a fond grandmother, scolding Mouret for not sending the dear children to see her oftener, for she was always so delighted to have them with her, she said.

"Well, here we are in October again," she remarked carelessly, after a while, "and I am going to begin having my day again, Thursdays, as in former seasons. I shall count upon seeing you, my dear Marthe, of course;

and you too, Mouret, you will look in occasionally, won't you, and not go on sulking with us forever?"

Mouret, who was beginning to grow a little suspicious of all his mother-in-law's affectionate chatter, was at a loss what to reply. This invitation came quite unexpectedly, and there was nothing in it to which he could take exception, so he merely said:

"You know quite well that I can't come to your house; you receive a lot of people who would be delighted to seize upon an opportunity of making themselves disagreeable to me. And, besides, I don't want to mix myself up with politics."

"You are quite mistaken, Mouret, quite mistaken!" Felicité replied. "My drawing-room is not a club; I would never allow it to become one. Ah! believe me, I had quite enough of politics long ago. What makes you say such a thing?"

"You receive all the Sub-Prefecture set," Mouret said, shortly.

"The Sub-Prefecture set!" she repeated, "the Sub-Prefecture set! Certainly I receive those gentlemen. But I don't think that Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies will be found very often in my house this winter. My husband has told him pretty plainly what he thought of his conduct in connection with the last elections. He has allowed himself to be tricked like a mere nincompoop. But his friends are very pleasant men. Monsieur Delangre and Monsieur de Condamin are extremely amiable persons, and that worthy Paloque is kindness itself, and I'm sure you can have nothing to say against Doctor Porquier."

Mouret shrugged his shoulders.

"Besides," she continued, with ironic emphasis, "I receive also Monsieur Rastoil's circle, the worthy Monsieur Maffre and our clever friend Monsieur de Bourdeu,



the former prefect. So you see we are not at all bigoted or exclusive! Of course when I am inviting a party of people, I don't ask those to meet each other who would be likely to quarrel. Besides wit and cleverness are welcome in whomsoever they are found, and we pride ourselves upon having at our gatherings all the most distinguished persons in Plassans. My drawing-room is neutral ground, remember that, Mouret; yes, neutral ground, that is the right expression."

She had grown quite animated by talking. Her drawing-room was her great glory, and it was her desire to reign there, not as a chief of a party, but as a queen of society. It is true that her friends said that she was adopting conciliatory tactics merely in conformity with the advice of her son Eugene, the minister, who had charged her to personify at Plassans the gentleness and amiability of the Empire.

"You may say what you like," Mouret growled, "but that Maffre of yours is a bigot, and your Bourdeu is a fool, and most of all the others are a set of rascals. That's my opinion about them. I am much obliged to you for your invitation, but it would disturb my habits too much to accept it. I like to go to bed in good time, and I prefer stopping at home."

Félicité rose from her seat, and turning her back upon Mouret, she said to her daughter:

"Well, at any rate I may expect you, mayn't I, my dear?"

"Of course you may," replied Marthe, who wished to soften down her husband's blunt refusal.

The old lady was just going to leave, when a thought seemed to strike her, and she asked if she might kiss Désirée, whom she had seen playing in the garden. She would not let them call the girl into the house, but insisted on going out herself onto the terrace. When she



found Désirée, she was profuse in her fondling caresses of the girl, who seemed rather frightened of her. Then she raised her head as if by chance and looked at the curtains in the windows of the second-floor.

"Ah! you have let the rooms then? Oh, yes! I remember now; to a priest, isn't it? I've heard it spoken of. What sort of a person is he, this priest of yours?"

Mouret looked at her keenly. A sudden suspicion flashed through his mind, and he began to guess that it was entirely on account of the Abbé Faujas that his mother-in-law had favored them with this visit.

"Upon my word," he replied, without taking his eyes off her, "I really know nothing about him. But perhaps you are able to give me some information concerning him?"

"I!" she cried, with an appearance of great surprise. "Why, I've never even seen him! Stay, though I know he is one of the curates at Saint-Saturnin; Father Bourrette told me that. By the way, that reminds me that I ought to ask him to my Thursdays. The director of the Seminary and the bishop's secretary are already amongst my circle of visitors."

Then, turning to Marthe, she added:

"When you see your lodger you might sound him, so as to be able to tell me whether an invitation from me would be acceptable."

"We scarcely ever see him," Mouret hastily interposed. "He comes in and goes out without ever opening his mouth. And, besides, it is really no business of ours."

He still kept his eyes fixed suspiciously upon her, but she did not quail beneath her son-in-law's searching gaze.

"Very well, it's all the same to me," she said, with an appearance of the most perfect unconcern. "I shall be able to find out some other way of inviting him, if

he's the right sort of person, I've no doubt. Good-bye, my children."

As she was mounting the steps again, a tall old man appeared at the entrance of the house. He wore a great coat and a pair of very neat blue cloth trousers, and a fur cap pressed down over his eyes. In his hand he carried a whip.

"Hallo! there's uncle Macquart!" cried Mouret, casting a curious glance at his mother-in-law.

An expression of extreme annoyance passed over Felicité's face. Macquart, Rougon's illegitimate brother, had, by the latter's aid, returned to France after having compromised himself in the rising of 1851. Since his return from Piedmont he had been leading the life of a sleek and well-to-do citizen. He had bought, though where the money had come from no one knew, a small house in the village of Les Tulettes, about three leagues from Plassans. He had fitted up his establishment by degrees, and he had now even become possessed of a gig and a horse, and was constantly to be met on the high-roads, smoking his pipe and enjoying the sunshine, and sniggering like a tamed wolf. Rougon's enemies whispered that the two brothers had been guilty of some black business, and that Pierre Rougon was keeping Antoine Macquart.

"Good day, uncle!" said Mouret affectedly; "have you come to pay us a little visit?"

"Yes, indeed," Macquart replied, in tones as guileless as a child's. "You know that whenever I come to Plassans—Hallo, Felicité! I didn't expect to find you here! I came over to see Rougon. There was something I wanted to talk to him about."

"He was at home, wasn't he?" she exclaimed, with uneasy haste.

"Yes, he was at home," uncle Macquart replied, tran-

quilly. "I saw him, and we had a talk together. He is a good fellow, is Rougon."

He laughed slightly, and while Felicité continued quite restless and fidgety from anxiety, he went on talking in his drawling voice that was so strangely inflected as to make him seem constantly laughing at those whom he was addressing.

"Mouret, my boy, I have brought you a couple of rabbits. They are in a basket over there. I have given them to Rose. I brought another couple with me for Rougon. You will find them at home, Felicité, and you must tell me how they turn out. They are beautifully plump; I fattened them up for you. Ah, my dears! it pleases me very much to be able to make these little presents."

Felicité had turned quite pale, and pressed her lips tightly together as Mouret continued to look at her with a quiet smile. She would have been very glad to get away if she had not been afraid of Macquart beginning to gossip as soon as her back was turned.

"Thank you, uncle," said Mouret. "The plums that you brought us the last time you came were very good. Won't you have something to drink?"

"Well, that's an offer I really can't refuse."

When Rose brought him out a glass of wine, he sat down on the balustrade and slowly sipped at the glass, smacking his tongue and holding up the wine to the light.

Then Mouret, with an intonation that was full of meaning, suddenly asked him:

"And how are they getting on at Les Tulettes?"

Macquart raised his eyes and looked at them all. Then giving a final clack of his tongue he said, quite unconcernedly:

"Oh! very well. I heard of her the day before yesterday. She is still just about the same."

Félicité had turned away her head and no one spoke. Mouret had just put his finger upon one of the family's sore places by alluding to the mother of Rougon and Macquart, who had been shut up as a mad woman for several years past in the asylum at Les Tuilettes. Macquart's little property was near the mad-house, and it looked as though Rougon had posted the old scamp there to keep watch over their mother.

"It is getting late," Macquart said at last, rising from his seat on the balustrade, "and I want to get back again before night. I shall expect to see you over at my house one of these days, Mouret, my boy. You have promised me several times to come, you know."

"Oh, yes! I'll come, uncle, I'll come."

"Ah! but that isn't enough. I want you all to come; all of you do you hear? I am very dull out there all by myself. I will give you some dinner."

Then, turning to Félicité, he added:

"Tell Rougon that I shall expect him and you, too. You needn't be prevented from coming because the old mother happens to be near there. She is going on very well, I tell you, and is properly looked after. You may safely trust yourselves to me, and I will give you some wine that I picked up in La Seille, a light wine that will warm you up famously."

He began to walk toward the gate as he spoke. Félicité followed him so closely that she almost seemed to be pushing him out of the garden. They all accompanied him to the street. As he was untethering his horse, which he had fastened by the reins to one of the shutters, the Abbé Faujas, who was just returning home, passed the group with a slight bow. He glided on as noiselessly as a black shadow. Félicité turned round



sharply and followed him with her eyes till he reached the staircase, but she had not time to catch sight of his face. Macquart shook his head in utter surprise as he said:

"What! my boy, have you really got priests lodging with you now? That man has got a very strange eye. Take care! take care! cassocks bring ill luck with them!"

He took his seat in his gig and clucked his horse on and went down the Rue Balande at a gentle trot. His round back and fur cap disappeared past the corner of the Rue Taravelle. As Mouret turned round again, he heard his mother-in-law speaking to Marthe.

"I would rather you did it," she was saying; "the invitation would seem less formal. I should be very glad if you could find some opportunity of speaking to him."

She checked herself when she saw that she was overheard. Then, after having kissed Désirée effusively, she went away giving a last look to be quite sure that Macquart was not returning to gossip about her after her departure.

"I forbid you, you know, to mix yourself up in any way in your mother's affairs," Mouret said to his wife as they returned into the house. "She has always got some business or other on hand that no one can understand. What in the world can she want with the Abbé? She wouldn't invite him for his own sake, I'm sure; and she must have got some secret reason for doing so. That priest hasn't come from Besancon to Plassans for nothing. There is some mystery or other at the bottom of it."

Marthe had set to work again at the everlasting repairs of the family-linen which kept her busy for days together. Her husband went on speaking again.

"That old Macquart and your mother amuse me very

much. How they hate each other! Did you notice how angry she was when she saw him come? She seems as though she was in a perpetual state of fear lest he should make some unpleasant revelation— But they'll never catch me in his house. I've sworn to keep myself clear of all this business. My father was quite right when he said that my mother's family, these Rougons and Macquarts, were not worth a rope to hang them with. They are my relations as well as yours, so you needn't feel hurt at what I am saying. I say it because it is true. They are wealthy people now, but their money hasn't made them any better, but rather the contrary."

Then he set off to take a turn in the Cours Sauvaire, where he met his friends and talked to them about the weather and the crops and the events of the previous day. An extensive transaction in almonds, which he undertook the following day, kept him constantly occupied for more than a week and made him almost forget all about the Abbé Faujas. He was beginning, besides, to get a little weary of the Abbé, who did not talk enough and was too secretive. On two separate occasions he purposely avoided him, imagining that the priest only wanted to see him that he might get out of him the histories of the remainder of the Sub-Prefecture circle and Monsieur Rastoil's friends. Rose had informed him that Madame Faujas had been trying to get her to talk, and this had induced him to vow that he would keep his lips closed for the future. This formed another amusement for his unoccupied hours, and now as he looked up at the closely drawn curtains of the second-floor windows, he muttered:

"All right my good fellow! Hide yourself as much as you like! I know very well that you're watching me from behind those curtains, but you won't be much the wiser for your trouble, and you'll find yourself much mis-

taken if you expect to get any more information out of me about our neighbors!"

He derived great pleasure from the thought that the Abbé Faujas was watching him, and he took every precaution to avoid falling into any trap that might be laid for him. One evening as he was coming home he saw the Abbé Bourrette and the Abbé Faujas standing before Monsieur Rastoil's gate. He concealed himself behind the corner of a house and watched them. The two priests kept him waiting there for more than a quarter of an hour. They talked with great animation, parted for a moment and then rejoined each other again, and resumed their conversation. Mouret thought that he could detect that the Abbé Bourrette was trying to persuade the Abbé Faujas to accompany him to the president's. The latter was making excuses for not going and ended by refusing with some show of impatience. It was a Tuesday, the day of the weekly dinner. At last Bourrette entered Monsieur Rastoil's house, and Faujas went off in his quiet undemonstrative fashion to his own rooms. Mouret stood for a while thinking. What could be the Abbé Faujas' reason for refusing to go to Monsieur Rastoil's. All the clergy of Saint-Saturnin's dined there, the Abbé Fenil, the Abbé Surin and all the others. There was not a single priest in Plassans who had not enjoyed the fresh air by the fountain in the garden there. This new curate's refusal to go seemed a very extraordinary thing.

When Mouret got home again, he hurried off to the bottom of the garden to reconnoiter the second-floor windows. At the end of a moment or two he saw the curtain of the second window move to the right. He felt quite sure that the Abbé Faujas was behind it spying out what was going on at Monsieur Rastoil's. Then Mouret thought that he could discover by certain move-



ments of the curtain that the Abbé was in turn inspecting the gardens of the Sub-Prefecture.

The next day, a Wednesday, Rose told him as he was going out that the Abbé Bourrette had been with the second-floor people for at least an hour. Upon this he went back into the house and began to rummage about in the dining-room. When Marthe asked him what he was looking for, he replied sharply that he was trying to find a paper without which he could not go out. Then he went upstairs to see if he had left it there. After waiting for a long time behind his bedroom door, he thought he could distinguish a moving of chairs on the second floor, and then he went slowly downstairs, stopping for a moment or two in the lobby to give the Abbé Bourrette time to catch him up.

"Ah! is that you, your reverence? This is a fortunate meeting! You are going to Saint-Saturnin's, I suppose, and I am going that way too. We will keep each other company, if you have no objection."

The Abbé Bourrette replied that he would be delighted, and then they both walked slowly up the Rue Balande toward the Place of the Sub-Prefecture. The Abbé was a stout man, with an honest, open face, and great, child-like blue eyes. His wide silk girdle that was drawn tightly round him threw into relief a sleek and round stomach. His arms were unduly short and his legs were heavy and clumsy, and he walked with his head thrown slightly back.

"So you've just been to see our good Monsieur Faujas?" said Mouret, going to the point at once. "I must really thank you for having procured me such a lodger as is rarely to be found."

"Yes, yes," said the priest, "he is a very good and worthy man."

"He never makes the least noise, and we couldn't



really tell that there was anyone in the house. I've heard it said, do you know, that he is a man of unusual attainments, and that he has been sent here as a sort of compliment to the diocese."

They had now reached the middle of the Place of the Sub-Prefecture. Mouret stopped short and looked at the Abbé Bourrette keenly.

"Ah, indeed!" the priest merely replied, with an air of astonishment.

"So I've been told. The bishop, I suppose, intends to do something for him later on. In the meantime, the new curate has to keep himself in the background for fear of exciting jealousies."

The Abbé Bourrette resumed walking again and turned round the corner of the Rue de la Banne.

"You surprise me very much," he said, quietly. "Faujas is a very unassuming man; he is really far too humble. For instance, at the church he has taken upon himself, the little, simple duties which are generally left to the ordinary staff. He is a saint, but he is not very sharp or shrewd. I scarcely ever see him at the bishop's and he has always been very cold and distant with the Abbé Fenil, though I have strongly impressed it upon him that it is necessary to be on good terms with the Abbé if he wants to be well received at the bishop's. But he didn't seem to see it, and I'm afraid that he's deficient in judgment. He shows the same feeling, by the way, in his continual visits to the Abbé Compan, who has been confined to his bed for the last fortnight and whom I'm afraid we are going to lose. The Abbé Faujas' visits are most ill-advised, and will do him a great deal of harm. Compan has always been antagonistic to Fenil, and it's only a stranger from Besancon who could be ignorant of a fact that is well known to the whole diocese."

He was growing warm with his subject, and he

stopped short as they reached the Rue Canquoin and stood in front of Mouret.

"No, no, my dear sir," he said, "you have been misinformed; Faujas is as simple as a new-born babe. I'm not an ambitious man myself, and God knows how fond I am of Compan, who has a heart of gold, but, all the same, I keep my visits to him private. He said to me himself, 'Bourrette, my old friend, I am not much longer for this world. If you want to succeed me, don't be seen too often knocking at my door. Come after dark and knock three times, and my sister will let you in.' So now, you understand, I wait till night before I go and see him. One has quite plenty of troubles as it is without incurring unnecessary ones for oneself!"

His voice quavered, and he clasped his hands across his stomach as he resumed his walk, moved by a naive egotism which made him commiserate himself, while he murmured:

"Poor Compan! poor Compan!"

Mouret was feeling quite perplexed. All his theories about the Abbé Faujas were being altogether upset.

"I had such very precise details furnished to me," he ventured again to insist. "I was told that he was to be promoted to some important office."

"Oh dear, no!" cried the priest. "I can assure you that there is no truth in anything of the kind. Faujas has no expectations of any sort. I'll tell you something that proves it. You know that I dine at the president's every Tuesday. Well, last week he particularly asked me to bring Faujas with me. He wanted to see him, and find out what sort of a person he was, I suppose. Now, you would scarcely guess what Faujas did. He refused the invitation, my dear sir, bluntly refused it. It was all to no purpose that I told him he would 'make existence in Plassans quite intolerable to himself, and

that he would certainly embroil himself with Fenil by acting so rudely to Monsieur Rastoil; he persisted in having his own way, and wouldn't be persuaded by anything that I said. I believe that he even exclaimed, in a moment of anger, that he wasn't reduced to accepting dinners of that kind."

The Abbé Bourrette began to smile. They had now reached Saint-Saturnin and he detained Mouret for a moment by the little gate of the church.

"He is a child, a great child," he continued. "I ask you, now, could a dinner at Monsieur Rastoil's possibly compromise him in any way? When your mother-in-law, that good Madame Rougon, intrusted me yesterday with an invitation for Faujas, I did not conceal from her my fear that it would be badly received."

Mouret pricked up his ears.

"Ah! my mother-in-law gave you an invitation for him, did she?"

"Yes, she came into the vestry yesterday. As I make a point of doing what I can to oblige her, I promised her that I would go and see the confounded man this morning. I felt quite certain, however, that he would refuse."

"And did he?"

"No, indeed; much to my surprise he accepted."

Mouret opened his lips and then closed them again without speaking. The priest winked his eyes with an appearance of extreme satisfaction.

"I had to manage the matter very skillfully. For more than an hour I was explaining to him your mother-in-law's position. He kept shaking his head and could not make up his mind to go, and dwelt upon his desire for privacy. I had exhausted my stock of arguments when I called to mind one of the instructions which the dear lady gave me. She had told me to say that her drawing-

room was entirely neutral ground, and that that was a fact well known to all the town. When I pressed this upon his notice he seemed to waver and at last he consented to accept the invitation, and he has promised to go to-morrow. I am going to send a few lines to that excellent Madame Rougon to inform her of our success."

He lingered for a moment longer, rolling his great blue eyes, and said more to himself than to Mouret:

"Monsieur Rastoil will be very much vexed, but it's no fault of mine."

Then he added:

"Good morning, dear Monsieur Mouret; remember me very kindly to all your family."

He went into the church and let the muffled double-doors close softly behind him. Mouret gazed at them and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a fine old chatter-box!" he muttered; one of those men who never give you a chance of getting in a word, and who go on chattering away for hours without ever telling you anything worth listening to. So Faujas is going to black Felicité's to-morrow! It's really very provoking that I am not on good terms with that fool Rougon!"

All the afternoon he was occupied with business matters, but at night, just as they were going to bed, he said carelessly to his wife:

"Are you going to your mother's to-morrow evening?"

"No, not to-morrow," Marthe replied, "I have too many things to do. But I dare say I shall go next week."

He made no immediate reply, but just before he blew out the candle, he said:

"You are wrong not to go out oftener than you do. Go to your mother's to-morrow evening; it will enliven you a little. I will stay at home and look after the children."



Marthe looked at him in astonishment. He generally kept her at home with him, requiring all kinds of little services from her, and grumbling if she went out even for an hour.

"Very well," she replied, "I will go if you wish me to."

Then he blew out the candle and laid his head upon the pillow, as he said to his wife:

"That's right; and you can tell us all about it when you come back. It will amuse the children."

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## VI

About nine o'clock on the following evening, the Abbé Bourrette came for the Abbé Faujas. He had promised to go with him to the Rougons and introduce him. He found him standing in the middle of his great bare room quite ready to start, and putting on a pair of black gloves that were sadly whitened at the finger-tips. He could not suppress a slight grimace as he looked at him.

"Haven't you got another cassock?" he asked.

"No," replied the Abbé Faujas, very tranquilly. "This one is still very decent, I think."

"Oh, certainly! certainly!" stammered the old priest; "but its very cold outside. Hadn't you better put something round your shoulders? Well! well! come along then!"

The nights had just commenced to be frosty. The Abbé Bourrette, who was warmly wrapped up in a padded silk cloak, got quite out of breath as he panted along after the Abbé Faujas, who wore nothing over his shoulders except his thin and threadbare cassock. They stopped at the intersection of the Rue de la Banne with the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, in front of a house built

entirely of white stone, one of the handsome mansions of the new part of the town, with carved rose-work on each floor. A servant in blue livery received them at the door and ushered them into the hall. He smiled at the Abbé Bourette as he helped him to take off his wrapper, and seemed greatly surprised at the appearance of the other Abbé, tall, rough-hewn man as he was, who had ventured out on such a freezing night without a cloak. The drawing-room was on the first floor.

The Abbé Faujas entered it with head erect, and grave, though perfectly easy, demeanor, while the Abbé Bourrette, who was always very nervous when he went to the Rougons' house, although he never missed a single one of their receptions, deserted his companion and made his escape into an adjoining room. The Abbé Faujas made his way slowly up the whole length of the drawing-room to pay his respects to the mistress of the house, whom he felt sure he could recognize in the middle of a group of five or six ladies. He was obliged to introduce himself, and he did it in two or three words. Felicité had immediately risen from her seat, and she narrowly scanned him from head to foot with a hasty glance, and then her eyes sought his own with her polecat gaze, as she smilingly said:

"I am delighted, your reverence; I am delighted indeed."

The impression created by the Abbé was an unfavorable one. He was too tall, too square-shouldered, and his face was too hard and his hands too big. His cassock looked so frightfully shabby beneath the bright light of the chandelier that the ladies felt a kind of shame at seeing an Abbé so shockingly dressed. They spread out their fans, and began to giggle behind them, and pretended to be quite unconscious of the Abbé's presence. The men exchanged very significant glances.

Félicité saw what a very churlish welcome the priest was receiving; she seemed annoyed at it, and remained standing in the middle of the room and raised her voice to force her guests into hearing the compliments which she addressed to the Abbé.

"That dear Bourrette," she said in her most winning tones, "has told me what difficulty he had in persuading you to come. I am really quite cross with you, sir. You have no right to deprive society of the pleasure of your company."

The priest bowed without making any reply, and the old lady laughed as she began to speak again, laying a meaning emphasis on certain of her words.

"I know more about you than you imagine, in spite of all the care you have taken to hide your light under a bushel. I have been told about you; you are a very holy man, and I want to be your friend. We shall have an opportunity to talk about this by and by, for I hope that you will now consider yourself as one of our circle."

The Abbé Faujas looked at her keenly as though he had recognized some masonic sign in the way in which she manipulated her fan. He lowered his voice as he replied to her:

"Madame I am entirely at your service."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," said Madame Rougon with another laugh. "You will find that we do our best here to make every one happy. But come with me and let me present you to my husband."

She crossed the room, disturbing several of her guests in her progress to open out a way for the Abbé Faujas, and giving him an importance which completed the general prejudice against him. In the adjoining room card-tables were set out. She went straight up to her husband who was gravely playing whist. He seemed slightly impatient as she stooped down to whisper in his ear, but

the few words she said to him caused him to spring up briskly from his seat.

"Capital! capital!" he murmured.

Then, having first apologized to those with whom he was playing, he went and shook hands with the Abbé Faujas.

At that time Rougon was a stout, pale man of seventy years of age, and he had acquired all a millionaire's gravity of expression. He was generally considered by the Plassans people to have a fine head, the white, uncommunicative head of a man of political importance. After he had exchanged a few courtesies with the priest he resumed his seat at the card-table. Felicité had just gone back into the drawing-room, her face still wreathed with smiles.

The Abbé Faujas took a seat near the fire-place and affected to be warming his feet. He had placed himself in such a position that he could command through the widely opened door the greater part of the large drawing-room. He was reflecting upon Madame Rougon's gracious reception of him, and he half closed his eyes as though he were thinking out some problem the solution of which escaped him. A moment or two afterward, while he was still absorbed in his reverie, he heard a voice behind him. His large-backed easy-chair quite concealed him from sight, and he now closed his eyes still more than before. He sat listening, and he looked as though the warmth of the fire had sent him to sleep.

"I went to their house just once at that time," an unctuous voice was saying. "They were then living opposite, on the other side of the Rue de la Banne. You were at Paris then; all Plassans at that period knew of the Rougons' yellow drawing-room; a wretched room hung with lemon-colored paper at fifteen sous the piece, with rickety furniture covered with cheap velvet. Look



at black Felicité now, dressed in plum-colored satin and seated on yonder couch! Do you see how she is reaching out her hand to little Delangre? Upon my word, she is giving it to him to kiss!"

Then a younger voice said, with something of a sneer:

"They must have managed to lay their hands on a pretty big share of plunder to be able to have such a beautiful drawing-room; it is the handsomest, you know, in the whole town."

"The lady," the other voice resumed, "has always had a passion for receptions. Oh! I know all about these Rougons. They are very clever people, and the Coup d'Etat has enabled them to satisfy the dreams of luxury and pleasure which had been tormenting them for the last forty years! This house which they are now occupying formerly belonged to a Monsieur Peirotte, one of the receivers of taxes, who was killed in the affair at Saint-Roure in the insurrection of '51. Upon my word, they've had the most extraordinary luck: a stray ball removed the man who was standing in their way, and they stepped into his place and house. If it had been a choice between the receivership and the house, Felicité would certainly have chosen the house. She had been hankering after it for half a score years nearly, and she made herself quite ill by covetously gazing upon the magnificent curtains that hung in the window. It was her Tuileries, as the Plassans people used to say, after the 2d of December."

"But where did they get the money to buy this house?"

"Ah! no one knows that, my dear fellow. Their son Eugene, who has had such an amazing political success in Paris, and has become a foremost minister and confidential adviser at the Tuileries, had no difficulty in obtaining the receivership and the cross for his father, who had played his cards very cleverly here. As for the

house, it was probably paid for by the help of advances. They borrowed the money, I suppose, from some banker. Anyhow, they are wealthy people to-day and they are making up for lost time. I fancy their son keeps up a constant correspondence with them, for they have not made a single false step "

The voice was silent again, but only to recommence almost directly with a suppressed laugh.

"Ah! I really can't help laughing when I see that precious grasshopper of a Felicité putting on all her fine duchess' airs! I always think of the old yellow drawing-room with its threadbare carpet and shabby furniture and the little fly-specked chandelier. And now, to-day, she receives the Rastoil young ladies. Just look how she is maneuvering the train of her dress! Some day, my dear fellow, that old woman will burst out of sheer triumph, in the middle of her green drawing-room!"

The Abbé Faujas had quietly slipped his head on one side that he might be able to see what was going on in the drawing-room. There he observed Madame Rougon standing in all her majesty in the center of a surrounding group of guests. She seemed to have increased in stature, and every back around bent before her glance, that was like that of some victorious queen.

"Ah! here's your father!" said the unctuous voice; "the good doctor is just arriving. I'm quite surprised he has never told you of all these matters. He knows far more about them than I do."

"Oh! my father is always afraid lest I should compromise him," replied the other gayly. "You know how he rails at me and swears that I shall make him lose all his patients. Ah! excuse me, please; I see the young Maffres over there, I must go and shake hands with them."

There was a sound of chairs being moved, and the Abbé Faujas saw a tall young man, whose face already

bore signs of weariness, cross the small room. The other person, he who had given such a lively account of the Rougons, also rose from his seat. A lady who happened to be passing near him allowed him to pay her some pretty compliments; and she smiled at him and called him "dear Monsieur de Condamin." Then the priest recognized him as the fine man of sixty whom Mouret had pointed out to him in the garden of the Sub-Prefecture. Monsieur de Condamin came and sat down on the other side of the fire-place. He was startled to see the Abbé Faujas, who had been quite concealed by the back of his chair, but he appeared in no way disconcerted, and he smiled and began to talk with easy pleasantness.

"I think, your reverence," he began, "that we have just been unintentionally confessing ourselves. It's a great sin, isn't it, to backbite one's neighbor? Fortunately you were there to give us absolution."

The Abbé, in spite of the control he had over his features, could not hide a slight blush. He perfectly understood that Monsieur de Condamin was reproaching him for having kept himself so perfectly quiet to listen to what was being said. Monsieur de Condamin, however, was not a man to preserve a grudge against anyone for their curiosity, but quite the contrary. By the end of a quarter of an hour he was quite at his ease. He was giving the Abbé Faujas a detailed account of Plassans with all the suave politeness of the easy man of the world.

"Your reverence is a stranger amongst us," he said, "and I shall be delighted if I can be of any assistance to you. Plassans is a little hole of a place, but one gets reconciled to it in time. I myself come from the neighborhood of Dijon and when I was appointed conservator of woods and rivers in this district, I found the place detestable, and thought I should be bored to death



here. That was just before the Empire. After '51, the provinces were by no means cheerful places to live in, I can assure you. In this department the folks were alarmed if they heard a dog bark, and they were ready to sink into the ground at the sight of a gendarme. But they calmed down by degrees, and resumed their old, monotonous, uneventful existence, and in the end I got quite resigned to my life here. I live chiefly in the open air; I take long rides on horseback, and I have made a few pleasant friendships."

He lowered his voice, and continued in confidential tones:

"If you will take my advice, your reverence, you will be careful what you do. You can't imagine what a scrape I was once neary falling into. Plassans, you know, is divided into three absolutely distinct divisions; the old district, where your duties will be confined to administering consolation and alms; the district of Saint-Marc, where our aristocrats live, a district that is full of tediousness and ill-feeling, and where you can't be too much upon your guard; and, lastly, the new town, the district that is now springing up round the Sub-Prefecture, which is the only one where it is possible to live with any degree of comfort. At first I was foolish enough to take up my quarters in the Saint-Marc district, where I thought that my position required me to reside. There, alack! I found myself surrounded by a lot of withered old dowagers and mummified marquises. There wasn't an atom of sociability, not a scrap of gayety, nothing but a sulky mutiny against the prosperous peace that the country was enjoying. I only just missed compromising myself, upon my word, I did. Pequeur used to chaff me, Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies, our sub-prefect; you know him, don't you? Well, then I moved into the Cours Sauvaire, and I took rooms on the Place.



At Plassans, you must know, the crowd is of no account, and the aristocracy are a dreadful lot that it's quite impossible to get on with; the only tolerable people are a few parvenus, quite delightful persons who are ready to incur any expense in entertaining their official acquaintances. Our little circle of functionaries is a very delightful one. We live amongst ourselves after our own inclinations, without caring a rap about the townspeople, just as if we had pitched our camp in some conquered country."

He laughed complaisantly and stretched himself further back in his chair, and turned up his feet to the fire; then he took a glass of punch from the tray which one of the servants handed to him, and sipped it slowly while he continued to watch the Abbé Faujas out of the corner of his eye. The latter felt that politeness required him to say something.

"This house seems a very pleasant one," he remarked, turning himself half-round toward the green drawing-room, from whence the sound of animated conversation was proceeding.

"Yes, yes," resumed Monsieur de Condamin, who checked his remarks every now and then to take a little sip of his punch. "The Rougons almost make us forget Paris. You would scarcely fancy here that you were in Plassans. It is the only pleasant and amusing drawing-room in the whole place, because it is the only one where all shades of opinion elbow each other. Pequeur, too, has very pleasant receptions. It must cost the Rougons a lot of money, and they haven't the public purse behind them like Pequeur has; though they have something better still, the pockets of the tax-payers."

He seemed quite pleased with this witticism of his. He put down his empty glass, which he had been holding in his hand, upon the mantel-piece, and then, drawing

his chair near to the Abbé Faujas and leaning forward toward him, he began to speak again:

"The most amusing comedies are being continually played here. But you ought to know the actors to appreciate them. You see Madame Rastoil over yonder between her two daughters, that lady of about forty-five with a head like a sheep's? Well, have you noticed how her eyelids trembled and blinked when Delangre came and sat in front of her? Delangre is the man there on the left, with a likeness to Punch. They were acquainted intimately some ten years ago, and he is said to be the father of one of the girls, but it isn't known which. The funniest part of the business is that Delangre himself didn't get on very well with his wife about the same time; and people say that the father of his daughter is an artist very well known in Plassans."

The Abbé Faujas considered that it was his duty to assume a serious expression on being made the recipient of confidences of such a nature as these, and he completely closed his eyes and seemed as though he no longer heard what was being said. Monsieur de Condamin continued, as though in justification of himself:

"I allow myself to speak in this way of Delangre, as I know him so well. He's a wonderfully clever and pushing fellow. His father was a bricklayer, I believe. Fifteen years ago he used to take up the little petty suits that the other lawyers wouldn't be bothered with. Madame Rastoil extricated him from a condition of absolute penury; she supplied him even with wood in the winter time to enable him to keep himself warm. It was through her influence that he won his first cases. It's worth mentioning that at that time Delangre had been shrewd enough to manifest no particular political proclivities; and so, in 1852, when they were looking out for a mayor, his name was at once thought of. He

was the only man who could have been chosen without alarming one or other of the three divisions of the town. From that time everything has prospered with him, and he has a fine future before him. The only unfortunate part of the matter is that he doesn't get on very well with Pequeur, and they are always wrangling about some silly trifles or other."

He broke off as he saw the tall young man, with whom he had been chatting previously, coming up to him again.

"Monsieur Guillaume Porquier," he said, introducing him to the Abbé, "the son of Doctor Porquier."

Then, as Guillaume seated himself, he asked him with a touch of irony:

"Well! what did you see to admire over yonder?"

"Nothing at all, indeed!" replied the young man with a smile. "I saw the Paloques. Madame Rougon always tries to hide them behind a curtain to prevent anything unpleasant happening. Paloque never takes his eyes off President Rastoil, hoping, probably, to kill him with suppressed horror. You know, of course, that the hideous fellow hopes to die president."

They both laughed. The ugliness of the Paloques was a perpetual source of amusement amongst the little circle of officials. Porquier's son lowered his voice as he continued:

"I saw Monsieur Bourdeu, too. Doesn't it strike you that he's got ever so much thinner since the Marquis de Lagrifoul's election? Bourdeu will never get over the loss of his prefecture; he had put all his Orleanist rancor at the service of the Legitimists in the hope that that course would lead him straight to the Chamber, where he would be able to win back his much regretted prefecture. Consequently he has been horribly disgusted and hurt that instead of himself they chose the marquis,



who is a perfect ass and hasn't the faintest notion of politics, while he, Bourdeu, is a very shrewd fellow."

"That Bourdeu, with his tightly-buttoned frock-coat and broad-brimmed hat, is a most over-bearing person," said Monsieur de Condamin shrugging his shoulders. "If such people as he were allowed to have their own way they would turn France into a mere Sorbonne of lawyers and diplomatists, and would bore us all to death—Oh! by the way, Guillaume, I have been hearing about you. You seem to be leading a merry sort of life."

"I?" exclaimed the young man with a smile.

"Yes, you, my fine fellow! and observe that I get my information from your father. He is much distressed about it, and he accuses you of gambling and of staying out all night at the club and other places. Is it true that you have discovered a low café behind the gaol where you go with a company of scamps and play the devil's own game? I have even been told—"

Here Monsieur de Condamin, observing two ladies enter the room, began to whisper in Guillaume's ear, while the young man replied with affirmative signs and shook with suppressed laughter. Then he bent forward in turn and whispered to Monsieur de Condamin, and the two of them, drawing themselves closely together with brightly glistening eyes, seemed to derive a prolonged enjoyment from this private story, which they did not dare to allow to reach the ladies' ears.

The Abbé Faujas had remained where he was. He could not hear what was being said, and he was occupying himself by watching the movements of Monsieur Delangre, who was bustling about the green drawing-room and making himself extremely agreeable. He was so absorbed in his observations that he did not see the Abbé Bourrette beckoning to him, and the latter was

obliged to come and touch his shoulder and ask him to follow him. He led him into the card-room with all the precaution of a man who has some very delicate communication to make.

"My dear fellow," he whispered, when they were alone in a quiet corner, "it is excusable in you, as this is the first time you have been here, but I must warn you that you have compromised yourself very considerably by talking so long with the persons you have just left."

Then, as the Abbé Faujas looked at him with great surprise, he added:

"Those persons are not looked upon very favorably. I myself am not passing any judgment upon them, and I don't want to repeat any scandal. I am simply warning you out of pure friendship, that's all."

He was going away, but the Abbé Faujas detained him, and said to him with a show of earnestness:

"You disquiet me, my dear Monsieur Bourrette; I beg of you to explain yourself. Without speaking any ill of any one, you can surely be a little clearer."

"Very well," replied the old priest, after a momentary hesitation, "Doctor Porquier's son causes the greatest distress to his worthy father, and sets the worst example to all the studious youth of Plassans. He left nothing but debts behind him at Paris, and here he is turning the whole town upside down. As for Monsieur de Condamin—"

Here he hesitated again, feeling embarrassed by the enormity of what he had to relate; then, lowering his eyes, he resumed:

"Monsieur de Condamin is free in his conversation, and I fear he is deficient in a sense of morality. He spares no one, and he scandalizes every honorable person. Then—I really hardly know how to tell you—but he has contracted, it is said, a not very creditable marriage.

You see that young woman there, who is not thirty years old, and who has such a crowd round her? Well, he brought her to Plassans one day from no one knows where. From the day of her arrival, she has been all-powerful here. It is she who has got her husband and Doctor Porquier decorated. She has influential friends at Paris. But I beg of you not to repeat any of this. Madame de Condamin is very amiable and charitable. I go to her house sometimes, and I should be extremely distressed, if I thought that she considered me an enemy of hers. If she has committed faults, it is our duty—is it not?—to help her return to a better way of life. As for her husband, he is, between ourselves a perfect scamp. Have as little as possible to do with him."

The Abbé Faujas gazed into the worthy Bourrette's eyes. He had just noticed that Madame Rougon was following their conversation from the distance, with an air of preoccupation.

"Wasn't it Madame Rougon who told you to come and give me this good advice?" he suddenly asked of the old priest.

"How did you know that?" the latter exclaimed in great astonishment. "She asked me not to mention her name, but since you have guessed it— Ah! she is a good, kind-hearted lady who would be much distressed to see a priest compromising himself in her house. She is unfortunately compelled to receive all sorts of persons."

The Abbé Faujas expressed his thanks, and promised to be more prudent in the future. The card-players had not taken any notice of the two priests, and the Abbé Faujas returned into the big drawing-room, where he was again conscious of hostile surroundings. He even experienced a greater coldness and a more silent contempt than before. While he was still standing there, behind



the Rastoil young ladies, who had not observed him, he heard the younger one ask her sister:

"What was it that this priest, of whom every one is talking, did at Besancon?"

"I don't quite know," the elder sister replied. "I believe he nearly murdered his vicar in a quarrel they had. Papa also said that he had been mixed up in some great business speculation which turned out badly."

"He's in the small room over there, isn't he? Somebody has just seen him laughing with Monsieur de Condamin."

"Oh! then they're quite right to distrust him if he laughs with Monsieur de Condamin."

This gossip of the two girls made the perspiration start from the Abbé Faujas' brows. He did not frown, but his lips were tightly compressed and his cheeks took an ashy tint. He seemed to hear the whole room talking of the priest whom he had tried to murder, and of the shady transactions in which he had been concerned.

Opposite him were Monsieur Delangre and Doctor Porquier, still looking very severe; Monsieur de Bourdeu's mouth was twisted scornfully, as he said something in low tones to a lady; Monsieur Maffre, the magistrate, was casting furtive glances at him and seemed to be piously resolved to examine him from a distance before condemning him; and at the other end of the room the two hideous Paloques craned out their malice-warped faces, in which shone a wicked joy at all the cruel stories that were being whispered about. The Abbé Faujas slowly retired as he saw Madame Rastoil, who had been standing a few yards away, come up and seat herself between her two daughters as though to keep them under the protection of her wing, and shield them from his touch.

As the priest stood there gazing at the company from

under his half-closed eyelids, he suddenly made a slight start, which he quickly suppressed. He had just caught sight of the Abbé Fenil leaning back in an easy-chair, and smiling quietly behind a perfect wall of petticoats. The eyes of the two men met, and they gazed at each other for some moments with the fierce expression of a couple of duelists about to engage in mortal combat. Then there was a rustling of silk, and the Abbé Fenil was hidden from sight by the ladies' dresses.

Félicité now contrived to get herself into the neighborhood of the piano, and when she had succeeded in getting the elder of the Rastoil girls, who had a pleasant voice, seated at it, and was able to speak to the Abbé Faujas without being heard, she drew him aside to one of the windows and said to him:

"What have you done to the Abbé Fenil?"

They began to talk in very low tones. The priest at first feigned surprise, but when Madame Rougon had murmured a few words, accompanied by sundry shruggings of her shoulders, he seemed to grow more open and talked more freely. They were both smiling and seemed to be merely exchanging ordinary courtesies, though the glistening of their eyes spoke of something much more serious. The piano was silent for a moment, and the elder Mademoiselle Rastoil began to sing "La Colombe du Soldat," which was a very favorite song at that time.

"Your *debut* has been most unfortunate," Félicité continued; "you have set people against you and I should advise you not to come again for a considerable time. You must make yourself popular and a favorite, you understand. Any rash act would be fatal."

The Abbé Faujas seemed absorbed in thought.

"You say that it was the Abbé Fenil who circulated these abominable stories?" he asked.

"Oh, he is much too wily to commit himself in such a way. He will just have faintly suggested them to his penitents. I don't know whether he has found you out, but he is certainly afraid of you! I am quite sure of that, and he will attack you in every possible way. The most unfortunate part of the matter is that he confesses the most important people in the town. It was he who had the Marquis de Lagrifoul elected."

"I was wrong to come this evening," the priest murmured.

Félicité bit her lips; then she continued with animation:

"You are wrong to compromise yourself with such a man as that Condamin. I did what I thought was for the best. When the person that you know of wrote to me from Paris I thought that I should be doing you a service by inviting you here. I imagined that you would be able to make it an opportunity for gaining friends. But, instead of doing what you could to make yourself popular, you have set every one against you. Please excuse my freedom, but you really seem to be doing all you can to insure your failure. You have committed nothing but mistakes in going to lodge with my son-in-law, in persistently keeping yourself aloof from others, and in going about in a cassock which makes the street-lads jeer at you."

The Abbé Faujas could not suppress a movement of impatience. But he merely replied:

"I will profit by your kind advice. Only, don't try to assist me—that would mar everything."

"Yes, what you say is only prudent," replied the old lady. "Only return to this room triumphant. One last word my dear, sir. The person in Paris is most anxious for your success, and it is for that reason that I am interesting myself in you. Now, don't make people



frightened of you and cause them to shun you; be pleasant and make yourself agreeable to the ladies. Remember that particularly; you must make yourself agreeable to the ladies if you want to get Plassans on your side."

The elder Mademoiselle Rastoil had just finished her song with a final flourish and the guests were softly applauding her. Madame Rougon left the Abbé to go and congratulate the singer. Then she went and took up her position in the middle of the room and shook hands with the visitors who were beginning to retire. It was eleven o'clock. The Abbé was much vexed to find that the worthy Bourrette had taken advantage of the music to effect his escape. He had been calculating on leaving with him, a course which would have enabled him to make a respectable departure. Now he would have to go away alone, which would be very prejudicial to him, as it would be reported through the town in the morning that he had been turned out of the house.

He retired again into the window-recess and spied about to find the means of making an honorable retreat.

The room was emptying fast, however, and there were only a few ladies left. At last he noticed one who was very simply dressed; it was Madame Mouret, whose slightly waving hair made her look younger than usual.

He looked with surprise upon her tranquil face and her great, peaceful, black eyes. While he was looking at her, she rose to take leave of her mother.

Félicité was feeling the most thrilling pleasure at seeing the highest society of Plassans leaving her with polite bows and thanking her for her punch and her green drawing-room and the pleasant evening they had spent there; and she was thinking how formerly these same fine folks had trampled her underfoot, to use her own expression, while now the richest amongst them could not find sweet enough smiles for "dear Madame Rougon."

"Ah madame!" murmured Maffre, the magistrate, "one quite forgets the passage of time here."

"You are the only pleasant hostess in all this uncivilized place," pretty Madame de Condamin smiled.

"We shall expect you at dinner to-morrow," said Monsieur Delangre, "but you must take pot-luck, for we don't pretend to do as you do."

Marthe was obliged to make her way through all this incense-offering crowd to reach her mother. She kissed her, and was about to retire when Felicité detained her and seemed to be looking round and trying to find some one. Then, catching sight of the Abbé Faujas, she said with a smile:

"Is your reverence a gallant man?"

The Abbé bowed.

"Then I should be much obliged to you if you would escort my daughter home. You both live in the same house, and so it will not put you to any inconvenience, and there is a little piece of dark lane which is not very pleasant for a lady by herself."

Marthe assured her mother, in her quiet way, that she was not a little girl and was not at all afraid, but as Felicité insisted and said she should feel easier if she had some one with her, she accepted the Abbé's escort. As the latter was leaving the room with her, Felicité, who accompanied them out onto the landing, whispered in the priest's ear with a smile:

"Don't forget what I told you. You must make yourself agreeable to the ladies, if you want to get Plassans on your side."

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## VII

That same night Mouret, who was still awake when

his wife returned home, plied Marthe with a long string of questions in his desire to find out what had taken place at Madame Rougon's. She told him that everything had gone off just as usual, and that nothing out of the common had happened. She just added that the Abbé Faujas had walked home with her, and that their conversation had been merely upon commonplace topics. Mouret was very much vexed at what he called his wife's indifference.

"If anyone had committed suicide at your mother's," he growled, as he angrily buried his head in the pillow, "you would know nothing about it!"

When he came home to dinner the next day, he cried out to Marthe as soon as he caught sight of her.

"I was quite sure of it! I knew you had never troubled yourself to use your eyes! It's just like you! Why, the whole town is talking about it! I couldn't go anywhere without some one speaking to me about it!"

"About what, my dear?" asked Marthe in astonishment.

"About the extraordinary success of the Abbé Faujas, forsooth! He was actually turned out of the green drawing-room!"

"Indeed he wasn't! I saw nothing of the kind."

"Haven't I told you that you never see anything? Do you know what the Abbé did at Besancon? He either murdered a priest or committed forgery! They can't tell for certain which it was. However, they seem to have given him a nice reception! He turned quite green. Well, it's all up with him now!"

Marthe bent down her head and allowed her husband to revel in the priest's discomfiture. Mouret seemed wildly delighted.

"I still stick to my first idea," he said; "your mother and he have got some underhand plot together. I hear that she showed him the greatest civility. It was she,



wasn't it, who asked him to accompany you home? Why didn't you tell me so?"

Marthe shrugged her shoulders slightly without replying.

"You are the most provoking woman!" her husband cried. "All the little details are of the greatest importance. Madame Paloque, whom I just met, told me that she and several other ladies had lingered behind to see how the Abbé would effect his departure, and that your mother availed herself of you to cover the parson's retreat. Just try to remember, now, what he said to you as he walked home with you."

He sat down by his wife's side and kept his keen little eye fixed upon her.

"Really," she said quietly, "he only talked to me about the most trifling matters, the merest commonplaces such as anyone might have said. He spoke about the cold, which was very sharp, and about the quietness of the town in the night-time, and then I think he spoke of the pleasant evening he had passed."

"Ah, the hypocrite! Didn't he ask you any question about your mother or her guests?"

"No. It's only a very short distance, you know, from the Rue de la Banne to here, and it didn't take us three minutes. He walked at my side without giving me his arm, and he took such long strides that I was almost obliged to run. I don't know why they should all be so bitter against him. He doesn't seem very well off, and he was shivering, poor man, in that worn old cassock of his."

Mouret was not without pity and sympathy.

"Ah! he must have shivered," he said; "he can't be able to keep himself warm now that the frost has come."

"I'm sure we have nothing to complain of in his conduct," Marthe continued. "He is very punctual in his

payments, and he makes no noise and gives no trouble. Where can you find a more desirable tenant?"

"Nowhere, I grant you. What I was saying just now was to show you what little attention you pay wherever you go, to what is going on about you. I don't suppose for a moment that the Abbé has murdered anyone any more than he has been bankrupt; and I said to Madame Paloque that people ought to see that their own linen was clean before finding fault with that of others. I hope she took the hint to herself."

This was a fib on Mouret's part, for he had said nothing of the kind to Madame Paloque; but Marthe's gentle pity had made him feel a little ashamed of the delight he had manifested at the Abbé's troubles. On the following days he went entirely over to the priest's side, and when he happened to meet a set of people that he detested, Monsieur de Bourdeu, Monsieur Delangre, and Doctor Porquier, he launched out into a warm eulogium of the Abbé, for the pleasure of annoying them. The Abbé was, he told them, a man of great courage and perfect guilelessness, but poor, and that it must have been some very base-minded person who had originated the calumnies about him.

"Isn't it pitiable?" he said sometimes to his wife, forgetting that she had heard him tell a very different story, "isn't it pitiable to see a lot of people who have stolen their money from no one knows where, so bitter against a poor man just because he hasn't got fifty francs to spare to buy a new cassock? Such conduct quite disgusts me! I ought to know what he does and what sort of a man he is, since he lives in my house; and so I'm not backward in telling them the truth. I want the Abbé to be my friend, and I mean to walk out with him arm-in-arm along the promenade to let people know that I'm not afraid of being seen with him, rich and

well-thought-of as I am; and I hope you will show all the kindness and consideration to these poor people that you can."

Marthe smiled quietly. She was delighted at the friendly disposition her husband was manifesting for their lodgers. Rose was ordered to show them every civility, and she was instructed to volunteer to do Madame Faujas' shopping for her on wet mornings. The latter, however, always declined the cook's services, but she no longer manifested that silent stiffness of demeanor which she had shown during the earlier days of her residence in the house.

The Abbé Faujas, too, did not now glide so hurriedly up and down the stairs as he had been used to do, and almost every day, as Mouret heard the rustling of his cassock as he came down, he presented himself at the foot of the staircase and told the priest that it would give him great pleasure to walk part of the way with him. He had thanked him for the little service he had done his wife, skillfully questioning him at the same time to find out if he intended again presenting himself at the Rougons'. The Abbé had smiled and freely confessed that he was not fitted for society. Mouret was delighted, feeling quite certain that he had had some influence in bringing about his lodger's decision, and he began to dream of abstracting him entirely from the green drawing-room and keeping him altogether to himself. So, when Marthe told him one evening that Madame Faujas had accepted a couple of pears, he looked upon it as a fortunate circumstance which would facilitate the execution of his designs.

"Haven't they really got a fire on the second floor this bitterly cold weather?" he asked in Rose's presence.

"No, indeed, sir," replied the cook, who understood that the question was meant for herself, "they couldn't



very well, for I've never seen the least bit of wood taken upstairs, unless they're burning their four chairs, or Madame Faujas manages to carry up the wood in her basket."

"It is not right of you to talk in that way, Rose," said Marthe. "The poor things must be shivering with cold in those big rooms."

"I should think so, indeed," exclaimed Mouret; "there were several degrees of frost last night and there was considerable fear felt about the olive-trees. The water in our jug upstairs was frozen. This room of ours here is a small one, and very warm."

The dining-room was carefully protected with pads, so that not the least draught could find its way through any crevice, and a great earthenware stove made the place as warm as a bake-house. In the winter time the young people read or amused themselves round the table, while Mouret made his wife play piquet till bed-time, which was a perfect punishment to her.

"Don't you think," Mouret continued, "that we really ought to ask the Faujases to come and spend the evenings here? They could at any rate be warm for two or three hours; and they would be company for us, too, and make us feel more lively. Ask them, and I don't think they'll refuse "

The next day when Marthe met Madame Faujas in the lobby, the invitation was given, and the old lady at once accepted it for herself and her son without the slightest hesitation.

"I'm surprised she didn't make some little demur about coming," Mouret said. "The Abbé is beginning to understand that he is wrong in living like a wild beast."

In the evening Mouret took care that the table was cleared in good time, and he put out a bottle of sweet wine and a plateful of little cakes which he had ordered to be bought. The tenants of the second floor came

downstairs about eight o'clock. The Abbé Faujas was wearing a new cassock and Mouret was so much surprised at the sight that he could only stammer out a few words in answer to the priest's courtesies.

"Indeed, your reverence, all the honor is for us. Come, children, put some chairs here!"

They all took their seats round the table. The room was uncomfortably warm, for Mouret had crammed the stove as full as it would hold to let his guests see that he made no account of a log more or less. The Abbé Faujas made himself very pleasant, fondling Désirée and questioning the two lads about their studies. Marthe, who was knitting stockings, raised her eyes every now and then in surprise at the flexible tones of this unwonted voice which she had not been accustomed to hear, sounding in the monotonous quietness of the dining-room. She looked at the priest's powerful face and his square-cut features, and then she bent her head again, without trying to hide the interest she took in this man who she knew was so poor. Mouret could not restrain himself from saying, with a sly smile:

"You needn't have troubled yourself, your reverence, to dress to come here. We don't go in for ceremony, as you know very well."

Marthe blushed, while the priest gayly related that he had bought the cassock that day. He kept it on, he said, to please his mother, who thought he looked finer than a king in his new robe.

"Don't you, mother?" he asked of the old lady.

Madame Faujas nodded her head without taking her eyes off her son.

They began to talk about various matters, and the Abbé Faujas appeared to throw off all his gloomy reserve. He listened attentively to Mouret, replied to his most insignificant remarks, and seemed to take an inter-

est in his gossiping talk. His landlord finished his account by saying:

"We spend our evenings in the way you see, always as quietly at this. We never invite anyone, as we are always more comfortable by ourselves. Every evening I have a game at piquet with my wife. It is a very old habit of ours and I could scarcely go to sleep without it."

"Pray don't let us interfere with it!" cried the Abbé Faujas.

"Oh dear no! It won't kill me to go without it for once."

The priest insisted for a time, but, when he saw that Marthe showed even greater determination than her husband not to play, he turned toward his mother, who had been sitting silent with her hands folded in front of her, and said to her:

"Mother, you have a game with Monsieur Mouret."

She looked keenly into her son's eyes. Mouret still continued to refuse to play and declared that he did not want to break up the party, but when the priest told him that his mother was a good player he gave way.

"Is she, indeed?" he said. "Then, if madame really wishes it, and no one objects—"

"Come along, mother, and have a game!" the Abbé Faujas said in more decided tones.

"Certainly," she replied, "I shall be delighted; but I shall have to change my place."

"Oh! there will be no difficulty about that," said Mouret, who was quite charmed. "You had better take your son's place, and perhaps your reverence will be good enough to go and sit next to my wife, and then madame can sit there next to me. There! that will do capitally."

The priest, who had at first been sitting opposite to



Marthe on the other side of the table, was now sitting next to her. They were quite apart by themselves at one end of the table, the two players having drawn their chairs close together to engage in their struggle. Octave and Serge had just gone up to their room. Désirée was sleeping with her head on the table after her usual custom. When ten o'clock struck, Mouret, who had lost the first game, did not feel inclined to go to bed and asked for his revenge. Madame Faujas consulted her son with a glance, and then in her tranquil fashion began to shuffle the cards. The Abbé had merely exchanged a few words with Marthe, only on commonplace topics. Marthe replied with a show of interest, and importing into the conversation something of her own quiet restfulness.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Mouret threw down the cards with some slight irritation.

"I have lost again!" he said. "I haven't had a single good card all the evening. Perhaps I shall have better luck to-morrow. We shall see you again then, I hope, madame?"

And when the Abbé Faujas began to protest that they could not think of abusing the Mourets' kindness by disturbing them in this way every evening, he continued:

"But you are not disturbing us at all, you are giving us pleasure. Besides, I have been defeated, and I'm sure madame can't refuse me another game.

When the priest and his mother had accepted the invitation and had gone upstairs again, Mouret began to excuse himself for having lost.

"The old woman isn't as good a player as I am, I'm sure," he said to his wife; "but she has got such eyes! I could really almost fancy she was cheating! Well! we shall see what happens to-morrow."

From that time the Faujases came down regularly every day to spend the evening with the Mourets. There were tremendous battles between the old lady and her landlord. She seemed to play with him and to let him win just frequently enough to prevent his being altogether discouraged, and this made him fume with suppressed anger, for he prided himself on his skill at piquet. From eight o'clock till bed-time they both remained seated at their end of the table, quite absorbed in their game.

At the other end, near the stove, the Abbé Faujas and Marthe were left entirely to themselves. The Abbé felt a masculine and priestly disdain for all women, and in spite of himself this disdain often made itself manifest in some slightly harsh expressions. At these times Marthe was affected with a strange feeling of anxiety, and raised her eyes with one of those sudden thrills of alarm which cause people to cast a hurried glance behind them, half expecting to see some concealed enemy raising his hand to strike. At other times she would check herself suddenly in the midst of a laugh on catching sight of his cassock, and she would relapse into silence, quite confused and astonished at finding herself talking so freely to a man who was so different from other men. It was a long time before there was any real intimacy between them.

The Abbé Faujas never directly questioned Marthe about her husband, or her children, or her house; but, nevertheless, he gradually made himself master of the slightest details of their history and manner of life. Every evening, while Mouret and Madame Faujas were contending furiously with each other, he contrived to learn some new fact. Upon one occasion he remarked that the husband and wife were surprisingly alike.

"Yes," Marthe replied with a smile "when we were

twenty years old we used to be taken for brother and sister; and, indeed, it was a little owing to that that we got married. People used to joke us about it, and were continually making us stand side by side, and saying what a fine couple we should make. The likeness was so striking that the worthy Monsieur Compan, though he knew us quite well, hesitated to marry us."

"But you are cousins, are you not?" the priest asked.

"Yes," she replied, with a slight blush, "my husband is a Macquart, and I am a Rougon."

Then she kept silence for a moment or two, ill at ease, for she felt sure that the priest knew the history of her family which was so notorious at Plassans. The Macquarts were an illegitimate branch of the Rougons.

"The most singular part of it is," she resumed, to conceal her embarrassment, "that we both resemble our grandmother. My husband's mother transmitted the likeness to him, while in me it has been reproduced after a break. It has leaped over my father."

Then the Abbé cited a similar instance in his own family. He had a sister, he said, who was the living image of her mother's grandfather. The likeness in this case had leaped over two generations. His sister, too, closely resembled the old man in her character and habits, and even in her gestures and the tone of her voice.

"It was just the same with me when I was a little girl; I have heard people say," remarked Marthe, "'That's aunt Dide all over again!'" The poor woman is now at Les Tulettes. She never had a strong head. As I have grown older, I have become less excitable and stronger, but I remember that when I was a child I hadn't very good health, and I used to have attacks of giddiness, and to be filled with the strangest fancies."

"And your husband?"

"Oh! he takes after his father, a journeyman hatter, a



careful, prudent man. But, though we were so much alike in face, it was quite a different matter as to our dispositions; yet as time has gone on we have grown to resemble each other very much. We were so peaceful and happy in our business at Marseilles! The fifteen years that I spent there have taught me to find happiness in my own home, in the midst of my children."

The Abbé Faujas noticed a touch of bitterness in her tone every time he led her to speak on this subject. He imagined a little drama for himself, in which this husband and wife, who were so alike in appearance, were considered by their relations as being made for each other, and were forced into marriage, while, in reality, the taint of illegitimacy, and the disagreement of mingled and always inharmonious strains of blood, helped to irritate the antagonism of two different temperaments. Then his mind dwelt upon the soporific effect of the fifteen years' fortune-making upon these two natures, who were now living upon that fortune in a sleepy corner of a small town. To-day, though they were both still young, there seemed to be nothing left but the ashes of their former selves. The Abbé tried cleverly to discover whether Marthe was resigned to her existence, and he found her full of common sense.

"I am quite contented with my home," she said; "my children are all that I want. I have never been much given to gayety, and I only feel a little dull here sometimes, that is all. I dare say I should have been better if I had had some mental occupation, but I have never been able to find one. And perhaps, after all, it's as well I haven't, for I should very likely have split my head. I could never even read a novel without giving myself a frightful headache, and for some nights afterward all the characters used to dance about in my brain. Needlework is the only thing which never fatigues

me, and I stay at home to keep out of the way of all the noise and chatter outside, and all the frivolous follies which only weary me."

She paused every now and then to glance at Désirée, who was sleeping with her head upon the table, and kept smiling with her innocent smile as she slept.

"Poor child!" she murmured. "She can't even do any needle-work. She gets dizzy directly. She is fond of animals, and [that's all she's capable of. When she goes to stay a month with her nurse she spends all her time in the farm-yard, and she comes back to me with rosy cheeks and as strong and well as possible."

She often spoke of Les Tulettes, manifesting a lurking fear of insanity, and the Abbé Faujas thus became aware of a strange dread haunting this peaceful home. Marthe loved her husband with a sober, unimpassioned love, but there was mingled with her affection for him a fear of his jokes and pleasantries, and his perpetual worryings. She was hurt, too, by his selfishness, and the loneliness in which he left her. When she spoke of him, she said:

"He is very good to us. You've heard him, I dare say, get angry sometimes, but that arises from his love of seeing everything in order, though he often carries it to an almost ridiculous extent, but in other matters he is quite right in pleasing himself. I know he is not very popular, because he has managed to accumulate a fortune, and still continues to do a good stroke of business every now and then; but he only laughs at what people say about him. They say nasty things, too, of him about me. But all that is quite untrue. I am entirely free. He certainly prefers to find me here when he comes home, instead of knowing that I am always off somewhere, paying calls and walking on the promenade. What, indeed, should I go out for?"

As she defended Mouret against the gossip of Plassans, her tones assumed a sudden animation as though she felt the need of defending him quite as much from the secret accusations which formulated themselves within her own mind; and she kept reverting with nervous uneasiness to the subject of life outside her own home; she seemed to seek a refuge within the narrow dining-room and the old-fashioned garden with its hedges of box, appearing full of a vague alarm of she knew not what, and doubtful of her strength and fearing some possible catastrophe. Then she would smile at her own childish fears, and shrug her shoulders as she resumed her knitting or the mending of some old shirt; and the Abbé Faujas would see before him only a cold, reserved house-wife, with listless face and inanimate eyes, who seemed to fill the house with a scent of clean linen and the soft perfume of blossoms gathered in the shade.

Two months passed away in this manner. The Abbé Faujas and his mother had become quite part of the regular family-life of the Mourets; they all had their recognized places every evening at the table, just as the lamp had its, and the same intervals of silence were broken night after night by the same remarks of the card-players, and the same subdued tones of the priest and Marthe. When Madame Faujas had not given him too tremendous a beating, Mouret found his lodgers extremely nice people.

"Oh! don't bother me with your stories!" he used to exclaim to those who attacked the Abbé Faujas. "You get hold of a lot of ridiculous nonsense and put absurd interpretations upon facts that admit of the simplest explanation. He's not a man who makes himself cheap, and I can quite understand that people don't like him for it and accuse him of pride."

Mouret greatly enjoyed being the only person in Plas-



sans who could boast of knowing the Abbé Faujas, and he even somewhat abused this advantage. Every time he met Madame Rougon he put on an air of triumph, and made her understand that he had stolen her guest from her, while the old lady contented herself with smiling quietly.

The evenings passed away one after another, and the first days of February had come round. In all the conversations between himself and Marthe, the Abbé Faujas had appeared carefully to avoid the subject of religion. She had once remarked to him, almost lightly:

"No, your reverence, I am not a very religious woman and I seldom go to church. At Marseilles I was always too busy and now I am too indolent to go out. And then I must confess to you that I wasn't brought up with religious ideas. My mother used to tell me that God would come to us quite as well at home."

The priest bowed his head without making any reply, and seemed to signify that he would rather not discuss such matters under such circumstances. One evening, however, he drew a picture of the unexpected comfort which suffering souls find in religion. They were talking of a poor woman whom troubles of every sort had driven to suicide.

"She was wrong to despair," said the priest in his deep voice. "She was ignorant of the comfort and consolation to be found in prayer. I have often seen heart-broken, weeping women come to us, and they have gone away again, filled with a resignation that they had vainly sought elsewhere, and glad to live; and this had come from their falling upon their knees and tasting the blessedness of humiliating themselves before God in some quiet corner of the church. They returned, forgetting all their old troubled life, and became God's entirely."

Marthe listened with a thoughtful expression to these

remarks of the priest, whose last words were spoken in a gradually softened tone that seemed to breathe of a superhuman felicity.

"Yes, it must be a blessed thing," she murmured as though she were speaking to herself; "I have thought about it sometimes, but I have always felt afraid."

The Abbé very seldom referred to such subjects as this, but he frequently spoke on the subject of charity. Marthe was very tender-hearted, and the tears rose to her eyes at the slightest tale of trouble. It seemed to please the priest to see her so moved to pity; and every evening he told her some fresh story of sorrow. She would let her work fall and clasp her hands as, with a sad and pitying face, she gazed into his eyes and listened to him as he poured out to her the heart-rending details of how some poor wretched persons had died of starvation, or of how others had been goaded by misery into committing base crimes. At these times she fell completely under his influence, and he might have done with her what he willed. At the other end of the table, in the meantime, there would every now and then break out a noisy disagreement between Mouret and Madame Faujas on some contested point in the game.

About the middle of February, a deplorable circumstance threw Plassans into a state of painful dismay. It was discovered that a number of quite young girls, scarcely more than children, had fallen into wicked ways in loafing about the streets, and it was not only with lads of their own age and position that they had gone wrong, but it was rumored that persons highly placed in the town would be compromised. For a week Marthe was very painfully affected by this discovery, which caused the greatest sensation. She was acquainted with one of the unfortunate girls, a fair-haired girl whom she had often caressed, and who was the niece of her cook,

Rose; and she said that she could not think about the poor little creature without shuddering all over.

"It is a great pity," said the Abbé Faujas to her one evening, "that there isn't a Home at Plassans on the model of the one at Besancon."

In reply to Marthe's pressing questions, the Abbé explained to her the constitution of this Home. It was a sort of refuge for girls from eight to fifteen years old, the daughters of working-men, whose parents were obliged to leave them during the day to go to their employment. During the day-time these girls were set to do needlework, and in the evening they were sent back to their parents. By this system the children were brought up out of the reach of all vice and in the midst of the best examples. Marthe thought the idea an extremely good one, and she gradually became so prepossessed with it that she could talk about nothing else than the necessity of founding a similar institution at Plassans.

"We might put it under the patronage of the Virgin," the Abbé Faujas suggested. "But there are such difficulties in the way! What is quite essential to its success is some woman with a motherly heart, full of zeal and absolutely devoted to the work."

Marthe drooped her head and looked at Désirée, who was asleep by her side, and she felt the tears welling from beneath her eyelids. She made inquiries as to the steps that it would be necessary to take for founding such a Home, the cost of constructing it, and the annual expenses.

"Will you help me?" she suddenly asked the priest one evening.

The Abbé Faujas gravely took her hand and held it within his own for a moment, while he told her that she had one of the fairest souls he had ever known. He



would willingly do what he could, he told her, but he said that he should rely altogether upon her, for the assistance that he himself would be able to give would be very small. It would be for her to form a committee of the ladies of the town, to collect subscriptions, and to take upon herself, in a word, all the delicate and onerous duties connected with an appeal to the charity of the public. He appointed a meeting with her for the following day at Saint-Saturnin's to introduce her to the diocesan architect, who would be able to tell her much better than he himself could do about the expenses that would have to be incurred.

Mouret was very gay that evening as they went to bed. He had not allowed Madame Faujas to win a single game.

"You seem quite pleased about something to-night, my dear," he said to his wife. "Did you see what a beating I gave the old lady downstairs? "

As he observed Marthe taking a silk dress out of her wardrobe, he asked her with some surprise if she was intending to go out in the morning.

"Yes," she replied, "I have to go out. I have to meet the Abbé Faujas at the church about a matter which I will tell you of."

He stood motionless in front of her, and gazed at her with an expression of stupefaction to see if she was not really mocking him. Then, without any appearance of displeasure, he said in his bantering fashion:

"Hallo! hallo! well I never expected that! So you've gone over to the priests now!"

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## VIII

The next morning Marthe began by going to see her

mother, and she explained to her the pious undertaking which she was contemplating. She felt a little annoyed as the old lady smilingly shook her head, and she let her see that she considered her lacking in charity.

"It is one of the Abbé Faujas' ideas, isn't it?" Félicité asked suddenly.

"Yes," Marthe replied in surprise: "we have talked a good deal about it together. But how did you know?"

Madame Rougon shrugged her shoulders slightly without vouchsafing any more definite reply. Then she continued with a show of animation:

"Well, my dear, I think you are quite right. You ought to have some kind of occupation, and you have found a very good one. But you mustn't count upon my assistance. I had rather not appear in the matter, for people would say that it was I who was really doing everything, and that we had come to an understanding together to try and force our ideas upon the town. I should prefer that you yourself should have all the credit of your charitable inspiration. I will help you with my advice, if you will let me, but with nothing more."

"I was hoping that you would join the committee," said Marthe, who was feeling a little alarmed at the thought of finding herself alone in such an onerous undertaking.

"No! no! my presence on it would only do harm, I can assure you. Make it well known, on the contrary, that I am not going to be on the committee, that I have been asked, and have refused, excusing myself on the ground that I am too much occupied. Let it be understood, even, that I have no faith in your scheme; and that, you will see, will decide the ladies at once. Go and see Madame Rastoil, Madame de Condamin, Madame Delangre, and Madame Paloque. Be sure to see Madame Paloque; she will feel flattered, and will help

you more than all the others. If you find any difficulty about anything come here again and tell me."

She went out of the room with her daughter to the head of the stairs; then she stopped and looked her in the face, saying with her sharp, old woman's smile:

"I hope the dear Abbé keeps well?"

"Yes, he is very well," replied Marthe. "I am going to Saint-Saturnin's, where I am to meet the diocesan architect."

Marthe and the priest had considered that matters were in too indefinite a stage for them to interfere with the architect's arrangements, and so they had planned just to meet him at Saint-Saturnin's, where he came every day to inspect a chapel that happened to be under repair at the time. It would seem like a chance meeting. When Marthe walked up the church, she caught sight of the Abbé Faujas and Monsieur Lieutaud talking together on some scaffolding, from which they at once came down upon seeing her.

The conversation lasted for a good half-hour. The architect showed much kindly interest in the scheme. He advised them, however, not to erect a special building for the Home of the Virgin, as the Abbé called the projected refuge. It would cost too much money, he thought; and it would be better, he said, to buy some building already in existence, and adapt it to suit the requirements of their scheme. He suggested a house in the suburbs which had formerly been used as a boarding-school, and which was now for sale. A few thousand francs would enable him to entirely restore it from its present ruined condition.

"That is settled then," said Marthe, as she took leave of the architect. "You will make a little estimate, so that we may know what we are about? And please keep our secret, will you?"



The Abbé Faujas went with her as far as the side door of the church. As they passed together before the high-altar, while she was still engaged in briskly talking to him, she was suddenly surprised to miss him from her side. She turned round to look for him and she saw him bent almost double before the great cross in its muslin veil. She recollected where she was, and glanced round her with an uneasy expression and trod as silently as she could. When they reached the door, the Abbé who had become very grave and serious, silently reached out to her his finger, which he had dipped in the holy water, and she crossed herself in great disquietude of mind. Then the muffled double-doors fell back softly behind her with a sound like a suppressed sigh.

From the church Marthe went to Madame de Condamin's. She felt quite happy as she walked through the streets in the fresh air; the few visits that she had now to make seemed to her almost like pleasure-parties. Madame de Condamin welcomed her with effusive kindness, and expressed her delight at seeing that dear Madame Mouret who came so seldom. When she learned the business on hand, she declared herself delighted with it, and quite ready to devote herself in every way to furthering it. She was wearing a lovely mauve dress, with knots of pearl-gray ribbon, in that pretty boudoir of hers where she played the part of the exiled Parisian.

When Marthe told her that her mother could not join the committee she manifested a still greater enthusiasm for the scheme.

"It is a great pity that she has so many things to do," she said with a touch of irony; "she would have been of such great assistance to us. But it can't be helped. I have plenty of friends. I will go and see the bishop. I'll promise you that we shall succeed."

She would not listen to any of the details of the alter-

ations or the expenses. She was quite sure, she said, that whatever money was wanted would be found, and she meant the Home to be a credit to the committee, and that every part of it should be as handsome and comfortable as possible. She added with a laugh that she quite lost her head if she began to dabble in figures; but she undertook to specially charge herself with the preliminary steps and the general furtherance of the scheme. Dear Madame Mouret, she said, was not accustomed to begging, and she would go with her on her visits and would take several of them off her hands altogether. By the end of a quarter of an hour she had made the business entirely her own, and it was now she who was giving instructions to Marthe. The latter was just about to take her leave when Monsieur de Condamin came into the room; and she lingered on, feeling ill at ease and not daring to say any more on the subject of her visit in the presence of the conservator of rivers and forests, who, it was rumored, was compromised in the matter of the poor girls with whose shameful story the town was ringing.

Madame de Condamin, however, explained the great scheme to her husband, who manifested the most perfect ease, and gave utterance to the most moral sentiments.

"It is an idea which could only have occurred to a mother," he said gravely, in tones which made it impossible to know whether he was serious or not. "Plassans will be indebted to you, madame, for a purer morality."

"But I must tell you that the idea is not my own! I have merely adopted it," Marthe replied, made uneasy by these praises. "It was suggested to me by a person whom I esteem very highly."

"Who?" asked Madame de Condamin, with a show of curiosity.

"The Abbé Faujas."

Then Marthe with great frankness, told them the high opinion she held of the priest, and she represented him as a man worthy of the highest respect, whom she was very happy to have live in her house. Madame de Condamin listened with approving little nods of her head.

"I have always said so!" she exclaimed. "The Abbé Faujas is a very distinguished priest. But there are such a lot of malicious people about! The idea, you say, is his. We shall have to persuade him to take a prominent part in putting it into execution. I can assure you that I always liked and defended the Abbé."

"I have talked with him, and I thought him a very good fellow," the conservator of rivers and forests interposed.

His wife silenced him with a gesture. By this time, Monsieur de Condamin alone bore all the shame of the equivocal marriage which he was charged with having made; the young woman, whom he had brought from no one knew where, had succeeded in getting herself pardoned and liked by all on account of her pleasant ways and taking looks, to which provincial folks are more susceptible than might be imagined.

"I will leave you," he said with a slight touch of irony, "to your good designs. Octavie, don't forget to be dressed in good time. We are going this evening, you know, to the Sub-Prefecture."

After he had left the room, the two women resumed their conversation for a few moments longer. Madame de Condamin inveighed eloquently against vice.

"Well, then!" she said, as she pressed Marthe's hand for a last time, "it is all settled, and I am entirely at your service as soon as you call for my help. If you go to see Madame Rastoil and Madame Delangre, tell them that I will undertake to do everything and that all we want from them is their names. My idea is a good



one, don't you think? We won't depart a hairbreadth from it. Give my kindest regards to the Abbé Faujas."

Marthe at once proceeded to call upon Madame Delangre, and then upon Madame Rastoil. She found them both very polite but less enthusiastic than Madame de Condamin. They discussed the pecuniary side of the scheme. A large sum of money would be required, they said, and the charity of the public would certainly never provide it, and there was a great risk of the whole business coming to a ridiculous termination. Marthe tried to reassure them and plied them with figures. Then they asked her what ladies had consented to join the committee. The mention of Madame de Condamin's name left them without a word to say, and when they learned that Madame Rougon had excused herself from joining, they became more favorably minded.

Madame Delangre had received Marthe in her husband's study. She was a tame little woman of a servant-like meekness, whose intrigues had remained a matter of legend in Plassans.

"Indeed," she ended by saying, "there is nothing I should like to see better. It would be a school of virtue for the youth of the working-classes, and it would be the means of saving many weak souls. I cannot refuse my assistance, for I feel quite sure I can be of much use from the fact that my husband, as mayor, is brought into continual contact with all the most influential people. But I must ask you to give me till to-morrow before I make a definite reply. Our position requires us to exercise the greatest circumspection, and I should like to consult Monsieur Delangre."

In Madame Rastoil, Marthe found a woman who was very listless and prudish, searching about for words of excessive propriety in her references to the unfortunate girls. She was a sleek, plump person and was em-

broidering a very gorgeous alb, sitting between her two daughters, when Marthe entered the room; but she had sent the girls away at her visitor's first words.

"I am much obliged to you for having thought about me," she said; "but really I am very much occupied. I am already on several committees and I don't know whether I should have the time. I have had some such an idea as your own myself, but my scheme was a larger one, and perhaps more complete and comprehensive. For a whole month I have been intending to go and talk to the bishop about it, but I have never been able to find the time. Well! we will unite our efforts, and I will tell you my own views, for I think you are making a mistake in some points. As it seems necessary, I will surrender still more of my time. It was only yesterday that my husband said to me: 'Really you never attend to your own affairs; you are always looking after other people's.'"

Marthe glanced at her curiously, thinking of her old entanglement with Monsieur Delangre, which was still chuckled over in the cafés of the Cours Sauvaire. The wives of the mayor and the president had received the mention of the Abbé Faujas' name very suspiciously, the latter especially so. Marthe was, indeed, a little vexed at this exhibition of distrust of a person for whom she vouched; and so she made a point of dwelling upon the Abbé's good qualities, and forced the two women to acknowledge the merit of this priest who lived a life of retirement and supported his mother.

When she left Madame Rastoil's, Marthe had only to cross the road to get to Madame Paloque's, who lived on the other side of the Rue Balande. It was seven o'clock, but she was anxious to get this last call paid, even if she had to keep Mouret waiting and get herself scolded in consequence. The Paloques were just going

to sit down to table in a chilly dining-room, whose prim coldness and formal neatness spoke of the provinces. Madame Paloque hastened to put back the lid upon the soup-tureen, from which she had just begun to serve, vexed at being thus found at table. She was very polite, humble almost, though she was really feeling much put-out by a visit which she had not expected. Her husband, the judge, sat before his empty plate with his hands upon his knees.

"The little hussies!" he exclaimed, when Marthe spoke of the girls of the old quarter of the town. "I have been hearing some nice accounts of them to-day in court. It was they who led on and enticed some of our most respectable towns-people. You are wrong, madame, to interest yourself in such vermin."

"I am very much afraid," Madame Paloque said in her turn, "that I cannot be of any assistance to you. I know no one, and my husband would cut his hand off rather than beg for the smallest trifle. We live here very quietly and modestly, quite happy to be forgotten and let alone. Even if promotion were offered to my husband now, he would refuse it. Wouldn't you, my dear?"

The judge nodded his head in assent. They both exchanged a slight smile, while Marthe sat ill at ease in the presence of these two hideous faces, seamed and livid with gall and bitterness, whose owners played so well into each other's hands in this little comedy of feigned resignation. Fortunately she called to mind her mother's counsels.

"I had quite counted upon you," she said, making herself very pleasant. "We shall have Madame Delangre, Madame Rastoil, and Madame de Condamin; but, between ourselves, these ladies will only give us their names. I should have liked to find some lady of good position and kindly, charitable disposition, who would



have taken a stronger interest and shown more energy in the matter, and I thought that you would be the very person. Think what gratitude Plassans will owe us if we can only bring such an undertaking to a successful issue!"

"Of course, of course!" Madame Paloque murmured, quite delighted at Marthe's insinuating words.

"I am sure you are wrong in fancying that you are without any power to assist us. It is very well known that Monsieur Paloque is a great favorite at the Sub-Prefecture; and between ourselves I may say that he is intended to succeed Monsieur Rastoil. This would be a very good opportunity for Madame Paloque to emerge a little from the obscurity and privacy in which she keeps herself, and to let the world see the head and the heart she has got."

The judge seemed to be much exercised in mind. He looked at his wife with his blinking eyes.

"Madame Paloque has not refused," he said.

"No, certainly not," interposed the latter. "If you really stand in need of me, that settles the matter. I dare say I am only going to be guilty of another piece of folly, and give myself a lot of trouble without ever getting a word of thanks for it. Well, well, we can't change ourselves, and I suppose we shall go on being dupes to the end! You may count upon me, my dear madame."

The Paloques rose and Marthe took leave of them, thanking them for their kindly interest.

When Marthe at last got back home, it was nearly eight o'clock. Mouret had been waiting for a whole half-hour for his dinner, and she was afraid that there would be a terrible scene. But, when she had undressed and came downstairs, she found her husband sitting astride an over-turned chair tranquilly beating a tattoo

on the table-cloth with his fingers. He was terribly full of teasing and banter.

"Well," he said, "I had quite made up my mind that that you were going to spend the night in a confessional-box. Now that you have taken to going to church, you had better give me notice when you are invited by the priests, so that I can dine out."

All through the dinner he indulged in pleasantries and witticisms of this kind, and Marthe was much more distressed by them than if he had openly stormed at her. During dessert Rose came into the room, looking quite scared, and said that Monsieur Delangre had come and wanted to see madame.

"Hallo! have you begun to associate with the authorities as well?" Mouret sniggered in his sneering fashion.

Marthe went into the drawing-room to receive the mayor's visit. With much polite courtesy the latter told her that he had felt unwilling to wait till the next day to come and congratulate her upon her charitable and noble idea. Madame Delangre was a little timid, and he had come now to say in her name that she would be delighted to serve on the committee of lady patronesses of the Home of the Virgin. As for himself, he would certainly do all he could to further the success of a scheme that would be so useful and so conducive to morality.

Marthe accompanied him to the street-door. There as Rose held up the lamp to light the foot-path, the mayor added:

"Will you tell the Abbé Faujas that I shall be glad to have a little conversation with him, if he will kindly come and see me? As he has had experience of an establishment of this kind at Besancon, he will be able to give me some valuable information. I mean the town to pay at any rate the building expenses. Good-bye,

dear madame; give my best compliments to Monsieur Mouret, whom I won't disturb just now."

When the Abbé Faujas came down with his mother at eight o'clock, Mouret merely said to him, with a laugh:

"So you walked off my wife to-day, eh? Well, don't spoil her for me too much, and don't make a saint of her."

Then he absorbed himself in the game. He was going to engage in a terrible struggle with Madame Faujas, who was burning for revenge after suffering defeat for three evenings; and so Marthe was left quite free to tell the Abbé all she had done during the day. She seemed full of a child-like pleasure and was quite excited with the afternoon she had spent out. The Abbé made her repeat certain details and he promised to go and see Monsieur Delangre, although he would have preferred remaining completely in the background.

"You were wrong to mention my name at all," he said, as he saw her so excited and unreserved; "but you are like all other women, and the best causes would be spoilt in your hands."

She looked at him in surprise at this blunt exclamation, feeling that thrill of fear which she still occasionally experienced in the presence of his cassock. Every priest looks upon woman as an enemy, but when the Abbé saw that she was hurt by his too stern reproof, he softened his tones and said:

"I think only of the success of your noble design. I am afraid that I should only compromise it, if I myself were to appear in it. You know very well that I am not a favorite in the town."

Marthe, seeing him so humble, assured him that he was mistaken and that all the ladies had spoken of him in the highest terms. Then they talked over the great scheme,



dwelling on the smallest details, till eleven o'clock struck. It had been a delightful evening.

Mouret had caught a word or two now and then between the deals.

"Well, then," he said, as they were going to bed, "so you two are going to do away with vice? It's a splendid idea."

Three days later the committee of lady patronesses was formally constituted. The ladies having elected Marthe as president, she, upon her mother's advice, which she had privately sought, immediately appointed Madame Paloque treasurer. They both gave themselves a great deal of trouble in directing circulars and looking after a host of other little details. In the meantime, Madame de Condamin had gone from the Sub-Prefecture to the bishop's, and from the bishop's to the houses of various other influential persons, explaining in her pretty fashion "the happy idea that had occurred to her," exhibiting some lovely toilettes, and carrying off subscriptions and promises of assistance. Madame Rastoil, on the other hand, told the priests who came to her house on the Tuesday how she had formed a plan of rescuing the unfortunate girls from vice, and then contented herself by charging the Abbé Bourrette to make inquiries of the Sisters of Saint-Joseph if they would be willing to come and serve in the projected refuge; while Madame Delangre confided to the little company of functionaries that the town was indebted for the Home to her husband, to whose kindness the committee already owed a room in the City Hall, where they could meet and deliberate at their ease. Plassans was speedily excited throughout by this pious turmoil, and soon there was nothing spoken of but the Home of the Virgin. There was an outburst of praises, and the friends of each of the lady patronesses made up a little

party of their own, each little party working strenuously for the success of the undertaking. Subscription lists were opened in all the three quarters of the town within a week, and as the "Plassans Gazette" published these lists with the amount of the subscriptions, a feeling of pride was awakened, and the most notable families contended with each other as to which should be the most generous.

In the midst of all the talk on the subject Abbé Faujas' name frequently cropped up. Although each of the lady patronesses claimed the idea as originally her own, there was a prevailing belief that it was the Abbé who had brought it with him from Besancon. Monsieur Delangre made an express statement to this effect to the municipal council at the meeting when they voted the purchase of the building which the diocesan architect had suggested as being most suited to the requirements of the Home. The previous evening the mayor had had a very lengthy conversation with the priest, and as they parted they had exchanged a prolonged grasp of the hand. The mayor's secretary had even heard them call each other "my dear sir." This brought about quite a revolution in the Abbé's favor. From that time he had a group of partisans who defended him against the attacks of his enemies.

"Well, your reverence," Mouret said to him with a laugh, "you are quite in the odor of sanctity now. One would scarcely think that not six months ago I was the only one to say a good word for you! But if I were you I shouldn't trust too much to it all; you have still the bishop's set against you."

The priest shrugged his shoulders slightly. He knew quite well that the hostility he still met with came from the clergy. The Abbé Fenil kept Monseigneur Roussetot trembling beneath the rough strength of his will.

When the former, about the end of March, left Plassans to make a short journey, the Abbé Faujas profited by his absence to make several calls upon the bishop. The Abbé Surin, the bishop's private secretary, reported that that "wretched man" had been closeted for hours together with his lordship, and that the latter had manifested an atrocious temper after the interview. When the Abbé Fenil returned, the Abbé Faujas discontinued his visits, and again suppressed himself in the former's presence. But the bishop still showed himself very much disturbed, and it was quite evident that something had occurred to upset the careless prelate's ease of mind. At a dinner which he gave to his clergy he showed himself particularly friendly to the Abbé Faujas, who was only an humble curate at Saint-Saturnin's.

The Abbé Faujas now manifested a complete serenity. He still continued his severe life, but he seemed permeated with a pleasant ease of mind. It was on a Tuesday evening that he triumphed definitively. He was looking out of the window of his own room, enjoying the early warmth of the spring, when Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies' guests came into the garden and bowed to him from the distance. Madame de Condamin was there, and she carried her familiarity so far as to wave her handkerchief to him. Just at the same time, on the other side, Monsieur Rastoil's guests came to sit on some rustic seats in front of the water-fall. Monsieur Delangre was able to look from the terrace of the Sub-Prefecture across Mouret's garden, and to see what was going on in the judge's grounds, owing to the difference of the levels.

"You will see," he said, "that they won't deign even to notice him."

But he was wrong. The Abbé Fenil, having turned his head as though by chance, took off his hat, and



then all the other priests who were there did the same, and the Abbé Faujas returned their salute. Then, after having glanced slowly over the two sets of guests on his right hand and on his left, he withdrew from the window and pulled together the white curtains with scrupulous exactitude.

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## IX

The month of April was very mild and warm, and in the evenings, after dinner, the young Mourets went to amuse themselves in the garden. Marthe and the priest too, as they found the dining-room becoming very close, also went out onto the terrace. They sat a few yards away from the window, which was kept wide open, just outside the stream of bright light which the lamp poured out onto the tall hedges of box. There, in the deepening dusk, they discussed all the little details connected with the Home of the Virgin.

Sometimes Marthe, full of a tender emotion and penetrated with a gentle languor that made her words fall slowly from her lips, would check her speech as she caught sight of the golden train of some shooting-star, and smile as she leaned her head back a little and looked up at the heavens.

"There's another soul leaving purgatory and entering paradise!" she murmured.

Then as the priest kept silent, she added:

"How pretty they are, these little beliefs! One ought to be always able to remain a little girl, your reverence."

She no longer now mended the family linen in the evenings. She would have had to light a lamp on the terrace to be able to see to do it, and she preferred the

dusky shadow of the warm night, which seemed to thrill her with a peaceful happiness; and, besides, she now went out every day, which fatigued her, and when dinner was over she did not feel energetic enough to take up her needle. Rose had been obliged to undertake the mending, as Mouret was beginning to complain that his socks were all in holes.

Marthe was, indeed, very busy. Besides the meetings of the committee over which she presided, she had numerous other things to attend to, visits to make, and superintendence to exercise. She deputed much of the necessary writing and other little matters to Madame Paloque; but she was so anxious and eager to see the Home actually established and in working order, that she went off to the suburb in which the building was situated three times a week, to make sure that the workmen were not wasting their time. When she thought that satisfactory progress was not being made, she hurried off to Saint-Saturnin's to find the architect, and grumbled to him and begged him not to leave the men without his supervision. Monsieur Lieutaud smiled, and assured her that everything would be completed within the stipulated time.

The Abbé Faujas, too, protested that sufficient progress was not being made, and he urged Marthe not to give the architect a moment's peace, and so she ended by going to Saint-Saturnin's every day. She went into the church with her brain full of figures, and preoccupied with the consideration of walls that had to be pulled down and rebuilt. The chilliness of the church cooled down her excitement a little. She dipped her fingers in the holy water and crossed herself to do as the people did. The vergers grew to know her and bow to her, and she herself became quite familiar with the different chapels and the sacristy, where she sometimes had to go to

find the Abbé Faujas, and the wide corridor and low cloisters through which she had to pass. At the end of a month there was not a corner in Saint-Saturnin's which she did not know well. She began to love the lofty arches and the solemn nakedness of the walls, the altars draped in their protecting covers, and the chairs all arranged in order; and as soon as the muffled double doors swung to behind her, she began to experience a feeling of supreme restfulness, a forgetfulness of all the weary cares of the world, and a perfect peace throughout her whole being.

"Saint-Saturnin's is such a pleasant place," she let slip one evening before her husband, after a close, sultry day.

"Would you like us to go and sleep there?" Mouret asked, with a laugh.

The Abbé Faujas manifested no consciousness of the slow awakening which was every day increasingly going on within her. Sometimes, however, she would catch him as he was going to read the burial office; and he would speak to her for a moment between a couple of pillars in his surplice, that breathed out a vague odor of incense and wax tapers. The priest would hurry away to accompany the funeral; while she stayed on there, lingering in the empty nave, where one of the vergers was extinguishing the candles. When the Abbé Faujas, as he crossed the church with her, bowed before the high-altar, she had acquired the habit of bowing likewise, at first out of a feeling of mere propriety, but afterward the action had become mechanical, and she bowed when she was quite alone. Up to this time this act of reverence had comprised all her devotion. Two or three times she had come to the church on days of high functions, without having been previously aware of them; but when she saw that the church was full of worship-



ers and heard the pealing of the organ, she hurried away, thrilled with a sudden fear and not daring to enter the door.

"Well!" Mouret would frequently ask her with his sniggering laugh, "when do you mean to be confirmed?"

He was perpetually bantering her, but she never replied to him, only fixing upon him the gaze of her eyes, in which a passing brightness glistened when he went too far. By degrees he became more bitter as he grew tired of mocking at her.

"What sense is there in going and mixing yourself up with a lot of priests?" he would growl at times when his dinner was not ready when he wanted it. "You are forever away from home now, and there's no keeping you in the house for an hour at a time! I shouldn't mind myself, if everything weren't going to pieces here. I never get any of my things mended, the table is not even laid by seven o'clock, there's no making anything out of Rose, and the whole house is left open to thieves."

He picked up a duster that was lying about, locked up a bottle of wine that had been left out, and began to wipe the dust off the furniture with his fingers, working himself up to a higher pitch of anger as he cried:

"There'll be nothing left for me soon but to take up a broom myself and put an apron on! Do you know that I spent a couple of hours this morning in putting this wardrobe in order? No, my good woman, things can't go on any longer in this way!"

At other times there was a disturbance about the children. Once when Mouret came home he found Désirée "wallowing like a young pig," in the garden, where she was quite alone, and lying on her stomach before an ant-hole, trying to find out what the ants were doing in the ground.

"We may be very thankful, I'm sure, that you don't

sleep away from the house as well!" he cried as soon as he caught sight of his wife. "Come and look at your daughter! I wouldn't let her change her dress that you might see what a pretty sight she is."

The girl was crying bitterly while her father kept turning her round.

When Rose had taken Désirée away, he continued:

"You live now only for other people's children. You can't give a moment to your own! What a goose you must be to go knocking yourself up for a parcel of drabs who only laugh at you and have their clandestine meetings in every hole and corner of the ramparts!"

He stopped to take breath and then went on again:

"See that Désirée is properly taken care of before you go picking up girls from the gutter. One of these days we shall be finding her in the garden with a leg or an arm broken. I don't say anything about Octave or Serge, though they are up to all kinds of diabolical tricks. Only yesterday they burst open a couple of flag-stones out on the terrace by letting off crackers. I tell you that if you don't keep yourself at home we shall find the whole house blown to bits one of these days."

Marthe said a few words in self-defense. She was obliged to go out, she urged. There was no doubt that Mouret, who was possessed of an ample fund of common sense, in spite of his proclivities for teasing and jeering, was right. The house was getting into a most unsatisfactory condition. In the evening, at table, they all dined badly and quarreled amongst themselves. Rose only did just what she liked, and she was of opinion, besides, that her mistress was quite in the right.

Matters reached such a point at last that Mouret, happening to meet his mother-in-law, complained to her bitterly of Marthe's conduct, although he was quite aware

of the pleasure he was affording the old lady by discovering to her the troubles of his household.

"You astonish me extremely!" Felicité replied with a smile. "Marthe always seemed to me to be afraid of you, and I considered her even too yielding and obedient."

"Ah, yes, indeed!" Mouret cried, with a hopeless look, "once she would have sunk into the ground to avoid a quarrel; a mere glance was sufficient, and she did everything I desired. But that's all quite altered now. I may remonstrate and shout as much as I like, but she will only go her own way, for all that."

Felicité replied with some hypocrisy:

"I will speak to Marthe if you like. But it might, perhaps, hurt her if I did. Matters of this kind are better confined between husband and wife. I don't feel very uneasy about them; you'll soon get back again, I've no doubt, all the quiet peacefulness of which you used to be so proud."

Mouret shook his head with downcast eyes.

"No! no!" he said; "I know myself too well. I can make a noise, but that does no good. In reality I am as weak as a child. People are quite wrong in supposing that I have had my own way with my wife by force. She has generally done what I wanted her to do, because she was quite indifferent about everything, and would as soon do one thing as another. Mild as she looks, she is very obstinate, I can tell you. Well, I must try to make the best of it."

When Marthe went to see her mother the next day, the latter received her with some demonstration of coldness, and said to her:

"It is wrong of you, my dear, to show yourself so neglectful of your husband. I saw him yesterday and he is quite angry about it."



Marthe fixed her eyes upon her mother.

"Ah! he has been complaining about me!" she said shortly. "The least he could do would be to be silent, for I never complain about him."

Then she began to talk of other matters, but Madame Rougon brought her back to the subject of her husband by asking about the Abbé Faujas.

"Perhaps Mouret isn't very fond of the Abbé, and so he finds fault with you in consequence. Is that so, do you think?"

Marthe showed great surprise.

"What an idea!" she exclaimed. "What makes you think that my husband doesn't like the Abbé Faujas? He hasn't said anything to you, has he? Oh no! you are quite mistaken. He would go and find them up in their own rooms, if the mother didn't come down to have her game with him."

Mouret, indeed, never opened his mouth about the Abbé Faujas. He joked him a little bluntly sometimes, and he occasionally brought his name into the teasing banter with which he tormented his wife, but that was all.

One morning, as he was shaving, he exclaimed to Marthe:

"I'll tell you what, my dear; if ever you go to confession, take the Abbé for your director, and then your sins will, at any rate, be kept amongst ourselves."

The Abbé Faujas heard confessions on Tuesdays and Fridays. On these days Marthe used to avoid going to Saint-Saturnin's. She alleged that she did not want to disturb him; but she was really rather acting under the influence of that species of timid uneasiness which disquieted her when she saw him in his surplice that exhaled the mysterious odor of the sacristy. One Friday, she went with Madame de Condamin to see how the works

at the Home of the Virgin were getting on. The men were just finishing the frontage. Madame de Condamin found fault with the ornamentation, which, she said, was mean and characterless. There ought to have been, she urged, two slender columns with a pointed arch, something that was at once light and religious-looking, a design that would be a credit to the committee of lady patronesses. Marthe hesitated for a time, but she gradually gave way before Madame de Condamin's remarks, and at last allowed that the design was a very poor one. Then as the latter pressed her, she promised to speak to Monsieur Lieutaud on the subject that very day. In order that she might keep her promise, she went to the cathedral before returning home. It was four o'clock when she got there, and the architect had just left. When she asked for the Abbé Faujas, a verger told her that he was hearing confessions in the chapel of Saint Aurelia. Then for the first time she recollected what day it was, and she said that she could not wait. But as she was passing the chapel of Saint Aurelia on her way out, she thought that the Abbé might perhaps have caught sight of her. The truth was that she was feeling a singular faintness, and she sat down outside the chapel near the railing, and remained there. The sky was dusking over, and the church was filled with a misty gloom. Marthe had never before felt herself so completely overcome there. Her legs seemed to have lost all their strength, and her hands were so heavy that she clasped them across her knees to save herself from having to support their weight. Then everything around her appeared to vanish, and she was thrilled with a perfect happiness in some strange, trance-like condition.

The sound of a voice awoke her from this state of ecstasy.

"I am very sorry," said the Abbé Faujas; "I saw you but I could not get away."

Then she appeared to wake up with a start. She looked at him. He was standing before her in the dying light, in his surplice. His last penitent had just gone away, and the empty church seemed to be growing still more solemn.

"You want to speak to me?" he asked.

Marthe made an effort to recall her thoughts.

"Yes," she murmured; "but I can't remember now. Ah yes! it is about the frontage, which Madame de Condamin thinks too mean-looking. There ought to be two columns instead of that characterless opening. And they might put a pointed arch filled with stained glass. It would look very pretty. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

He gazed at her scrutinizingly, standing over her with his hands crossed outside his surplice, and bending down toward her his grave face.

"It would entail additional expense, of course; but we might just have them of soft stone with a simple molding. We might speak about it to the foreman, and he will tell us how much it will cost."

She drooped her head, as though she felt oppressed by the gaze that was bent upon her. When she raised it again and met the priest's eyes, she clasped her hands together, after the manner of a child seeking pardon, and she burst into sobs. The priest allowed her to weep, still standing in silence in front of her. Then she fell on her knees before him, weeping behind her hands, with which she covered her face.

"Get up, I beg of you," the Abbé Faujas said softly. "It is before God that you should go and kneel."

He helped her to rise and he sat down by her side. Then they talked together for a long time in low tones.



The night had now fully fallen, and the golden specks of the lamps gleamed through the black depths of the church. The priest's flowing words streamed out in long sequence after each of Marthe's weak and broken replies; and when at last they rose, he seemed to be refusing her some favor which she was seeking with persistence; then leading her toward the door, he raised his voice as he said:

"No! I cannot, I assure you I cannot. It would be better for you to take the Abbé Bourrette."

"I am in great need of your advice," Marthe murmured, beseechingly; "I think that with your help everything would be easy to me."

"You are mistaken," he replied, in harsher tones. "On the contrary, I fear that my direction would be prejudicial to you to begin with. The Abbé Bourrette is the priest you want, I can assure you. Later on, I may perhaps give you a different reply."

Marthe obeyed the priest's injunctions, and the next day the worshipers at Saint-Saturnin's were surprised to see Madame Mouret go and kneel before the Abbé Bourrette's confessional. Two days later there was nothing spoken of in Plassans but this conversion. The Abbé Faujas' name was pronounced with subtile smiles by certain people, but altogether the general impression was a good one and in favor of the Abbé. Madame Rastoil complimented Madame Mouret in open committee, and Madame Delangre professed to see in the matter a first blessing of God in reward to the lady patronesses for their good work in touching the heart of the only one amongst them who did not conform with the requirements of religion; while Madame de Condamin, taking Marthe aside, said to her:

"You have done very rightly, my dear. What you have done is a necessity for a woman; and as soon as

one begins to go out a little, it is necessary to go to church."

The only matter of astonishment was her choice of the Abbé Bourrette. The worthy man almost altogether confined himself to hearing the confessions of young girls. The ladies found him "so very uninteresting."

When Marthe came at the Thursday reception, her mother stepped up to meet her, and kissed her affectionately with some ostentation before the company. She herself had made her peace with God on the morrow of the Coup d'Etat. She was of opinion that the Abbé Faujas might now venture to show himself again in the green drawing-room; but he excused himself, making a pretext of his work and his love of privacy. Madame Rougon fancied she could see that he was scheming for a triumphal return in the following winter. The Abbé's success was gradually growing greater. For the first few months his only penitents had come from the vegetable market that was held at the back of the cathedral, poor costermongers, whose dialect he had quietly listened to without always being able to understand it; but now, he had a crowd of well-to-do citizens' wives and daughters dressed in silk kneeling before his confessional-box. When Marthe had quietly mentioned that he would not receive her amongst his penitents, Madame de Condamin had a sudden whim, and she deserted her director, the senior curate of Saint-Saturnin's, who was greatly distressed thereby, and transferred her confessions to the Abbé Faujas. Such a distinction as this gave the latter a firm position in Plassans society.

When Mouret learned that his wife went to confession, he merely said to her:

"You have been doing something wrong lately, I sup-

pose, since you find it necessary to go and tell all your affairs to a parson?"

From that time he never made any disparaging remarks about the management of the house or scolded his wife in the presence of anyone, but professed himself, as he had been used to do, the happiest of men. For whole weeks he refrained from all jeering or fault-finding as far as she was concerned, while upon Rose and his children he constantly poured out his mocking diatribes.

Previously he had only been economical, now he became miserly.

"There is no sense," he grumbled, "in spending money in the way we are doing. I'll be bound you are giving it all to those young hussies of yours. It's quite sufficient for you to waste your time over them. Now listen to me, my dear. I will give you a hundred francs a month for housekeeping, and if you will persist in giving money to these girls, who don't deserve it, you must save it out of your dress."

He kept firmly to his word, and the very next month he refused to get Marthe a pair of boots on the pretext that it would disarrange his accounts, and that he had given her full notice and warning. One evening his wife found him weeping bitterly in their bedroom. All her kindness of heart was excited, and she clasped him in her arms and besought him to tell her what was distressing him. But he tore himself roughly from her, and told her that he was not crying, but that he had got a bad headache, and that it was that which made his eyes red.

She felt much hurt. The next day Mouret affected great gayety; but some days afterward, when the Abbé Faujas and his mother came down-stairs after dinner, he refused to play his usual game of piquet. He did not feel clear-headed enough for it, he said. On the



next few nights he made other excuses, and so the games were broken off, and everyone went out onto the terrace. Mouret seated himself in front of his wife and the Abbé, talking and doing all he could to speak as much and as frequently as possible; while Madame Faujas sat a few yards away in the shade, quite silent and still, with her hands upon her knees, like some legendary figure watching over a treasure with the stern fidelity of a crouching dog.

"Fine evening!" Mouret used to say every night. "It is much pleasanter here than in the dining-room. It is very wise of you to come out and enjoy the fresh air. Ah! there's a shooting-star! Did your reverence see it? I've heard say that it's Saint Peter lighting his pipe up yonder."

While he went chattering on in this way, the Abbé Faujas and Marthe merely spoke a few brief sentences in reply to his direct questions. Generally they sat apart from him with their faces raised to the sky and their eyes gazing out into space. One evening Mouret fell asleep. Then, inclining their heads toward each other, they began to talk in subdued tones; while some few yards away, Madame Faujas, with her hands upon her knees, and with her eyes open and her ears apparently on the strain, yet without seeing or hearing anything, seemed to be keeping guard for them.

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## X

The summer passed away, and the Abbé Faujas seemed in no hurry to derive any advantage from his increasing popularity. He still kept himself in seclusion at the Mourets', and read his breviary as he walked slowly along, with downcast yes, through the whole length of

the green arbor. Mouret, who used to watch him, at last became affected with a sort of vague impatience and irritation at seeing his black figure walking up and down for hours together behind his fruit-trees.

"One has no privacy left!" he murmured to himself. "I can't lift my eyes now without catching sight of that cassock! He is like a crow, that fellow there, with his round eye that always seems to be on the look-out and watch for something. I don't believe in his fine disinterested airs."

It was not till early in September that the Home of the Virgin was completed. In the provinces the workmen are painfully slow; though it must be stated that the lady patronesses had twice quite upset Monsieur Lieutaud's designs in favor of ideas of their own. When the committee took possession of the building they rewarded the architect for the complaisance he had manifested by lavishing upon him the highest praises. Everything seemed to them perfectly satisfactory. The rooms were large, the connections between the rooms excellent, and there was a court-yard planted with trees and embellished with two small fountains. Madame de Condamin was particularly charmed with the facade, which was one of her own ideas. Over the door, the words "Home of the Virgin" were carved in gold letters on a slab of black marble.

On the occasion of the opening of the Home there was a very pleasing and affecting ceremony. The bishop, attended by the chapter, came in person to install the Sisters of Saint Joseph, who had been authorized to work the institution. A troop of some fifty girls of from eight to fifteen years of age had been collected together from the streets of the old quarter of the town, and all that had been required from their parents to obtain their children's admission was a declaration that their employ-

ment made it necessary that they should be absent from home during the whole day. Monsieur Delangre made a speech which was much applauded. He explained at considerable length, in a magnificent style, the details and arrangements of this new refuge, which he called "the school of virtue and labor, where young and interesting creatures would be kept safe from wicked temptations." A delicate allusion, toward the end of the speech, to the real author of the Home, the Abbé Faujas, attracted much notice. The Abbé was present amongst the other priests, and his fine, grave face remained perfectly calm and tranquil when all eyes were turned upon him. Marthe blushed on the platform, where she was sitting in the midst of the lady patronesses.

When the ceremony was over, the bishop expressed a desire to inspect the building in every detail; and, notwithstanding the evident annoyance of the Abbé Fenil, he sent for the Abbé Faujas, whose great black eyes had never quitted him for a single moment, and requested him to be good enough to accompany him, adding, with a smile and in easily audible tones, that he was sure he could not find a better guide. This little speech was circulated amongst the departing spectators, and in the evening all Plassans was commenting upon the bishop's favorable demeanor toward the Abbé Faujas.

The committee of lady patronesses had reserved for themselves one of the rooms in the Home. Here they provided a collation for the bishop, who ate a biscuit and drank two sips of Malaga, while he found an opportunity to say a polite word or two to each of them. This brought the pious festival to a happy conclusion, for both before and during the ceremony there had been heart-burnings and rivalries amongst the ladies, whom the delicate praises of Monseigneur Rousselot quite restored to good humor. When they were left to them-



selves again, they declared that everything had gone off exceedingly well, and they were by no means backward in their eulogies of the bishop. Madame Paloque alone looked sour. The bishop had forgotten her when he was distributing his compliments.

"You were right," she said furiously to her husband, when she got home again; "I have just been made a convenience of in this silly nonsense of theirs! It's a fine idea, indeed, to bring together all these corrupted hussies! I have given up all my time to them, and that great simpleton of a bishop, who trembles before his own clergy, can't even say thank-you! Just as if that Madame de Condamin had done anything, indeed! She is far too much occupied in showing off her dresses! Ah! we know quite sufficient about her, don't we? And that Madame Delangre and Madame Rastoil, too—well, it wouldn't be difficult to tell tales about them that would cover them with blushes! And they never stirred out of their drawing-rooms and haven't taken half the trouble about the matter that I have! And then there's that Madame Mouret, with her pretense of managing the whole business, and who does nothing but hang onto the cassock of her Abbé Faujas! She's another hypocrite of whom we shall hear pretty things one of these days! And they could all get a polite speech, while there wasn't a word for me! I'm nothing but a mere convenience and they treat me like a dog! But things sha'n't go on like this, Paloque, I can tell you. The dog will turn round and bite them before long!"

From this time Madame Paloque showed herself much less accomodating. She became very irregular in her secretarial work, and she declined to perform any duties that she did not fancy, till at last the lady patronesses began to talk of employing a paid secretary. Marthe detailed these sources of trouble to the Abbé Faujas and

asked him if he could recommend a suitable person.

"Don't trouble yourself to look out for any one," he said; "I dare say I can find you a fit person. Give me two or three days."

For some time past he had been frequently receiving letters with the Besancon postmark. They were all in the same hand-writing, a large, ugly hand. Rose, who took them up to him, used to say that he seemed vexed at the mere sight of the envelopes.

Mouret's old curiosity was awakened again at once by this correspondence. One day he took up one of the letters himself with a pleasant smile, telling the Abbé, as an excuse for his own appearance, that Rose was not in the house. The Abbé probably saw through Mouret's cunning, for he assumed an expression of great pleasure, as though he had been impatiently expecting the letter. Mouret, however, did not allow himself to be deceived by this piece of acting, and he stayed outside the door on the landing and glued his ear to the key-hole.

"From your sister again, isn't it?" asked Madame Faujas' hard voice. "Why does she worry you in this way?"

"It's always the same old story. She wants to come to us and bring her husband with her, that we may get him a place somewhere. She seems to think that we are wallowing in gold. I'm afraid they will be taking us by surprise some fine morning."

"No, no! we can't do with them here, Ovide!" his mother's voice replied. "They have never liked you; they have always been jealous of you. Trouche is a scamp, and Olympe is quite heartless. They would want everything for themselves, and they would compromise you and interfere with your work."

Mouret was too much excited by the meanness he was committing to be able to hear well, and he thought that

one of them was coming to the door, and so he hurried away. A few days later the Abbé Faujas gave in his presence a definite reply to Marthe while they were all out on the terrace.

"I think I can recommend you a suitable person," he said, in his calm unruffled manner. "It is a connection of my own, my brother-in-law, who is coming here from Besancon in a few days."

Mouret became very attentive, while Marthe appeared quite delighted.

"Oh, that is excellent!" she exclaimed. "I was feeling very much bothered about finding a suitable person. You see, with all those young girls, we must have a person of unexceptionable morality, but of course a connection of yours—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the priest; "my sister had a little hosiery business at Besancon, which she has been obliged to dispose of on account of her health; and now she is anxious to join us again as the doctors have ordered her to live in the south. My mother is very much pleased."

"I'm sure she will be," Marthe said. "I dare say it grieved you very much to have to be separated, and you must be very glad to be together again. I'll tell you what you must do. There are a couple of rooms upstairs that you don't use; why shouldn't your sister and her husband have them? They have no children, have they?"

"No, there are only their two selves. I had, indeed, thought for a moment of giving them those two rooms; but I was afraid of displeasing you by bringing other people into your house."

"Not at all, I assure you. You are very quiet people."

She checked herself suddenly as her husband violently pulled at her dress. He did not want to have the Abbé's relations in the house, and he remembered in what terms



Madame Faujas had spoken of her daughter and son-in-law.

"The rooms are very small ones," he began; "and his reverence would be put to inconvenience. It would be better for all parties that his reverence's sister should take lodgings somewhere else; there happen to be some rooms vacant just now in the Paloque's house, over the way."

There was a dead pause in the conversation. The priest said nothing and gazed up into the sky. Marthe thought he was offended, and she felt much distressed at her husband's bluntness. After the lapse of a minute she could no longer endure the embarrassed silence. "Well, it's settled then," she said, without trying to more skillfully knit together again the broken threads of the conversation; "Rose shall help your mother to clean the two rooms. My husband was only thinking about your own personal convenience; but, of course, if you wish it, it is not for us to object to your disposing of the rooms in any way you like."

Mouret was very angry when he was again alone with his wife.

"I can't understand you at all!" he cried. "When first I let the rooms to the Abbé, you were quite cross and displeased, and seemed to hate the thought of having even so much as a cat brought into the house; and now I believe you would be perfectly willing for the Abbé to bring the whole of his relations, down to his third and fourth cousins. Didn't you feel me tugging at your dress? You might have known that I didn't want these people. They are not respectable folks."

"How do you know that?" Marthe cried, annoyed by this accusation. "Who told you so?"

"Oh, well, it was the Abbé Faujas himself. I overheard him one day as he was talking to his mother."

She looked at him keenly; and he blushed slightly beneath her gaze as he stammered out:

"Well, it is sufficient that I do know. The sister is a heartless creature and her husband is a scamp. It's no use your putting on that air of insulted majesty; these are their own words, and I'm inventing nothing. I don't want to have them here, do you understand? The old lady herself was the first to object to her daughter coming here. The Abbé now seems to have changed his mind. I don't know what has led him to alter his opinion. It's some fresh mystery of his. He's going to make use of them somehow."

Marthe shrugged her shoulders and allowed her husband to rail on. He told Rose not to clean the rooms, but Rose now only obeyed her mistress' orders. For five days his anger vented itself in bitter words and furious recriminations. In the Abbé Faujas' presence he confined himself to sulking, for he did not dare to openly attack him. Then as usual he ended by submitting, and ceased to rail at the people who were coming. He drew his purse-strings still tighter than before, isolated himself again and shut himself up in his own selfish existence. When the Trouches arrived one October evening, he merely exclaimed:

"Well, they don't look a nice couple; they haven't pleasant countenances."

The Abbé Faujas did not appear very desirous that his sister and brother-in-law should be seen on the day of their arrival. His mother took up her position by the door, and as soon as she caught sight of them turning out of the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, she cast uneasy glances behind her into the passage and the kitchen. Luck, however, was against her, and, just as the Trouches arrived, Marthe, who was going out, came up from the garden, followed by her children.

"Ah! there you all are!" she said, with a pleasant smile.

Madame Faujas, who was generally so completely mistress of herself, could not suppress a slight show of confusion, and she stammered a word or two of reply. For some moments they stood confronting and looking at each other in the passage. Mouret had hurriedly mounted the steps, and Rose had taken up her position at the kitchen door.

"You must be very glad to be together again," said Marthe, addressing Madame Faujas.

Then, noticing the feeling of embarrassment which was keeping them all silent, she turned toward Trouche and added:

"You arrived by the five o'clock train, I suppose. How long were you in getting here from Besancon?"

"Seventeen hours on the railway," Trouche replied, displaying a mouth devoid of teeth. "It is no joke that, in a third-class carriage, I can tell you. One gets one's belly pretty well shaken up."

Then he laughed with a peculiar clattering of his jaws. Madame Faujas cast a very angry glance at him, and he began to fumble mechanically at his greasy overcoat, trying to fasten a button that was no longer there, and holding against his thighs a couple of card-board bonnet-boxes he was carrying, one green and the other yellow, probably with a view to concealing the stains. His red throat was perpetually gurgling beneath a twisted rag of a black tie, over which there only appeared the edge of a dirty collar. In his face, that was all scarred and that seemed to reek with vice, there glistened two little black eyes that ceaselessly rolled about, examining everybody and everything with an expression of astonishment and covetousness. They looked like the eyes of a thief study-



ing a house which he means to come back to and plunder during the night.

Mouret fancied that Trouche was examining the fastenings.

"That fellow," he thought to himself, "looks as though he were getting the pattern into his head!"

Olympe was conscious that her husband had made a vulgar remark. She was a tall, slight woman, fair and faded, with a flat, unpleasing face. She was carrying a little deal box and a big bundle tied up in a tablecloth.

"We have brought some pillows with us," she said, glancing at the bundle. "Pillows come in very usefully in a third-class carriage; they make you quite as comfortable as if you were traveling first-class. It is a great saving going third, and it is no use throwing money away, is it?"

"Certainly not," Marthe replied, somewhat surprised at the new-comers.

Olympe now came to the front and went on talking in a pleasing voice.

"It's the same thing with clothes," she said; "when I am going to set off on a journey I put on all my shabbiest things. I told Honoré that his old overcoat was quite good enough. You see I selected my worst dress; it is actually in holes, I believe, but it's quite good enough to get spoilt with the dust, isn't it, madame?"

"Certainly, certainly," replied Marthe, trying to force a smile.

Just at this moment a stern voice was heard from the top of the stairs giving utterance to a sharp exclamation:

"Come, mother!"

Mouret raised his head and saw the Abbé Faujas leaning upon the balustrade on the second floor, looking, very angry, and bending over, at the risk of falling, to get

a better view of what was going on in the passage. He had heard the sound of voices and he had been waiting there for a moment or two in great impatience.

"Come, mother, come!" he cried again.

"Yes, yes, we are coming up," Madame Faujas answered, seeming to tremble at the sound of her son's angry accents.

Then turning to the Trouches she said:

"Come along, my children, we must go upstairs. Let us leave madame to attend to her business."

But the Trouches did not seem to hear; they appeared quite satisfied to remain in the passage, and they looked about them with a pleased air, as though the house had just been presented to them.

"It is very nice, very nice indeed, isn't it, Honoré?" Olympe said. "After what Ovide wrote in his letters we scarcely expected to find it so nice as this, did we? But I told you that we ought to come here, and that we should do better here, and I was right, you see."

"Yes, yes, we ought to be very comfortable here," Trouche murmured. "The garden, too, seems a pretty big one."

Then, addressing Mouret, he asked:

"Do you allow your lodgers to walk in the garden?"

Before Mouret had time to reply, the Abbé Faujas, who had come downstairs, cried out in thundering tones:

"Come, Trouche! Come, Olympe!"

They turned round; but when they saw him standing on the steps looking terribly angry, they had nothing to say, but meekly followed after him. The Abbé went up the stairs in front of them without saying another word and without even having seemed to observe the presence of Mouret, who stood gazing after this singular procession. Madame Faujas smiled at Marthe to take away the awkwardness of the situation as she brought up

the rear. When Marthe had gone out and Mouret was left alone, he lingered for a moment or two in the passage. Upstairs, on the second floor, there was a sound of doors being noisily banged. Then there were loud voices to be heard, and then there was a dead silence.

"Has he locked them up separately, I wonder?" Mouret said to himself with a laugh. Well, anyhow, they are not a nice family."

In the morning Trouche, respectably dressed entirely in black, shaven, and with his scanty hair carefully brushed over his temples, was presented by the Abbé Faujas to Marthe and the lady patronesses. He was forty-five years of age, wrote a very good hand, and was said to have kept the books of a mercantile house for a long time. The ladies at once installed him as secretary. His duties were to represent the committee, and employ himself in certain routine work from ten o'clock till four in an office on the first floor of the Home. His salary was to be fifteen hundred francs.

"These good people are very quiet, you see," Marthe said to her husband a few days afterward.

The Trouches, indeed made no more noise than the Faujases. Two or three times Rose had asserted that she had heard quarrels between the mother and daughter, but the Abbé's grave voice had immediately restored them to peace.

Trouche went out every morning punctually at a quarter to ten, and came back again at a quarter past four. He never went out in the evening. Olympe occasionally went out with Madame Faujas to do her shopping, but she had never been seen to come down the stairs by herself.

The window of the room in which the Trouches slept looked upon the garden; it was kept constantly closed. One evening when the Abbé Faujas and his mother were



out on the terrace with the Mourets a slight involuntary cough was heard. As the priest sharply raised his head with an expression of annoyance, he caught sight of the shadowy forms of Olympe and her husband leaning out of the window in perfect stillness. For a moment or two he kept his eyes turned upward, interrupting his conversation with Marthe. The Trouches disappeared, and the subdued sound of the window-catch being fastened could be heard.

"You had better go upstairs, I think, mother," said the priest. "I am afraid you may be getting cold out here."

Madame Faujas wished them all good night; and, when she had retired, Marthe resumed the conversation by asking in her kindly tones:

"Is your sister worse? I have not seen her for a week."

"She has great need of rest," the priest answered shortly.

Marthe's sympathetic interest made her continue the subject.

"She shuts herself up too much," she said; "the fresh air would do her good. Why does she never come out into the garden? You know that it is entirely at your service."

The priest muttered a few vague words in excuse, and then Mouret, to increase his embarrassment, manifested a still greater amiability than his wife's.

"That's just what I was saying this morning," he began. "His reverence's sister might very well bring her sewing out here in the sun in the afternoons, instead of keeping herself shut up upstairs. And Monsieur Trouche, too he hurries up the stairs, four steps at a time. Tell them to come and spend an evening with us now and then. They must be frightfully dull up in that room of theirs all alone."

The Abbé did not seem to be in the humor this evening to submit to his landlord's pleasantry. He looked him straight in the face, and said very bluntly:

"I am much obliged to you, but there is little probability of their accepting your invitation. They are tired in the evening, and they go to bed. And, besides, that is the best thing they can do."

"Just as they like, my dear sir," replied Mouret, vexed at the Abbé's rough manner.

When he was alone again with Marthe, he said to her:

"Does the Abbé, I wonder, think he can persuade us that the moon is made of green cheese? It's quite clear that he is afraid that those scamps he has taken in will play him some bad trick or other. There will be a bad end to all this!"

Marthe was now living in a state of tender calm. She no longer felt troubled by Mouret's railings; the gradual growth of her faith filled her with an exquisite joy, and she glided softly and slowly into a life of pious devotion, which seemed to lull her with a sweet restfulness. The Abbé Faujas still avoided speaking to her of God. On two or three occasions when she was alone with him she had again broken out into fits of nervous sobbing, without knowing why, but finding a happiness in thus allowing herself to weep. On each of these occasions the Abbé had merely taken hold of her hands in silence, calming her with his serene and authoritative gaze. When she wanted to tell him of her causeless attacks of sadness, or of her secret joys, or of her need of guidance he smiled and hushed her, telling that these matters were not his concern, and that she must speak of them to the Abbé Bourrette. Then she retired completely within herself and sat trembling, while the priest seemed to assume a still colder reserve than before and strode away out of her reach like a god at whose

feet she was wishing to pour out her soul in humiliation.

Marthe's chief occupation now was attending mass and the various religious services and works in which she took part. In the vast nave of Saint-Saturnin's she was perfectly happy, and there she experienced the full sweetness of that purely physical restfulness for which she sought. She abandoned herself to a flood of tender emotion, in which everything around her seemed to assume a melting softness, even the unctuous voice of the Abbé Bourrette, who, after he had confessed her, sometimes kept her on her knees for a few minutes longer, while he talked to her about Madame Rastoil's dinners or the Rougons' reception.

Marthe often returned home in a condition of complete prostration. Religion seemed to quite break her down. Rose had become all-powerful in the house. She scolded Mouret and found fault with him because he dirtied too much linen, and she made him have his dinner only when it was ready for him. She even began to set to work at his conversion.

Mouret shrugged his shoulders. He let things take their own course, and sometimes he even did a bit of house-work himself, taking a turn or two with the broom when he thought the dining-room was looking particularly dusty. The children gave him most trouble. It was vacation-time, and, as their mother was scarcely ever in the house, Désirée and Octave, who had again failed in his examination for his degree, turned the place upside down. Serge was ill and kept to his bed, and he spent whole days in reading in his room. He had become the Abbé Faujas's favorite, and the priest lent him books. Mouret passed two dreadful months, at his wit's end how to manage his young folks.

"Since you won't look after them at all," he said to Marthe, "I must find some place or other to put them in.



It's your own fault if it causes you any grief. Octave is quite unendurable. He will never pass his examination, and it will be much better to at once teach him how to gain his own living instead of leaving him to go on idling his time away with a lot of good-for-nothings."

Marthe was very much distressed. She seemed to wake up, as it were, from a dream when she heard that one of her children was to be separated from her. She succeeded in getting the departure postponed for a week, and she remained at home and resumed her active life of former days. But she quickly dropped back again into her previous state of listless languor; and on the day when Octave came to kiss her, telling her that he was to leave for Marseilles in the evening, she seemed to have lost all her strength and energy, and she contented herself with merely giving him some good advice.

Mouret came back from the railway station with a very heavy heart. He looked about for his wife and he found her in the garden, crying under the arbor. Then he gave vent to his feelings.

"There! there's one the less now!" he cried. "You ought to feel glad of that. You will be able to go prowling about the church now as much as you like. Make your mind easy, the other two won't be here long. I shall keep Serge with me as he is a very quiet lad and is rather young yet to go and read for the bar; but if he's at all in your way, just let me know and I will free you of him at once. As for Désirée, I shall send her to her nurse.

Marthe went on weeping in silence.

"What is it you want? you can't be both in and out. Since you have taken to being away from your home, your children have become indifferent to you. That's logic, isn't it? Besides it is quite necessary to find places somewhere for all the crowd of people who are

living in our house. It isn't nearly big enough, and we shall be lucky if we don't get turned out of doors ourselves."

He had raised his eyes as he spoke and was looking at the windows of the second-floor. Then lowering his voice, he added:

"Don't go on crying in that ridiculous way! They are watching you. Don't you see that pair of eyes peeping through the red curtains? They are the eyes of the Abbé's sister; I know them quite well. You may always depend on seeing them there all the day through. The Abbé himself may be a good man, but as for those Trouches, you may be quite sure that they are enjoying our disagreement. Even though they have been the cause of the boy's going away, that is no reason why we should let them see what a trouble his departure has been to us both."

His voice broke, and he seemed on the point of sobbing himself. Marthe, deeply touched by his last words, was prompted to throw herself into his arms. But they were afraid of being observed, and they felt as though there were some obstacle between them that prevented them from coming together. Thus they separated, while Olympe's eyes still continued to glisten between the red curtains.

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## XI

One morning the Abbé Bourrette made his appearance, his face betokening the greatest distress. As soon as he caught sight of Marthe standing upon the steps, he hurried up to her and seizing her hands and pressing them he stammered out:

"Poor Compan! it is all over with him! he is dying! I am going upstairs, I must see Faujas at once."

When Marthe showed him the priest, who, according to his usual custom was walking about at the bottom of the garden, reading his breviary, he ran up to him, tottering on his short legs. He tried to speak to him and tell him the sad news, but his grief choked him, and he could only throw his arms round the Abbé Faujas' neck, while he sobbed bitterly.

"Hallo! what's the matter with the two parsons?" cried Mouret, who had hastily rushed out of the dining-room.

"The vicar of Saint-Saturnin's is dying," Marthe replied, showing much distress.

Mouret's face assumed an expression of surprise, and as he went back into the house, he murmured:

"Pooh! that worthy Bourrette will manage to console himself to-morrow when he is appointed vicar in the other's place. He counts on getting the post; he told me so."

The Abbé Faujas disengaged himself from the old priest's embrace, and listened to his sad news with a grave expression as he quietly closed his breviary.

"Compan wants to see you," the Abbé Bourrette said in broken tones; "he will not last the morning out. Oh! he has been a dear friend to me! We studied together. He is anxious to say good-bye to you. He has been telling me all through the night that you were the only man of courage in the diocese. For more than a year he has been getting weaker and weaker, and not a single priest in Plassans has dared to go and grasp his hand; while you, who scarcely knew him, have spent an afternoon with him every week. The tears came into his eyes just now as he was speaking of you; you must lose no time, my friend."



The Abbé Faujas went upstairs to his room for a moment or two, while the Abbé Bourrette paced impatiently and hopelessly about the passage; and then at last they set off together. The old priest wiped his brow and swayed about on the roadway as he spoke in broken tones.

"He would have died like a dog without a single prayer said for him if his sister had not come and told me about him at eleven o'clock last night. She did quite right, the dear lady, though he did not want to compromise any of us, and even would have foregone the last sacraments. Yes, my friend, he was dying alone and abandoned and deserted, he who was so clever, and who has only lived to do good!"

Then he was silent; but after a few moments he resumed again in a different voice:

"Do you suppose that Fenil will ever forgive me for this? Never, I expect! When Compan saw me bringing the consecrated oil, he was unwilling to let me anoint him and told me to go away. Well! well! it's all over with me now, and I shall never be vicar! But I am glad that I did it, and that I have not let Compan die like a dog. He has been at war with Fenil for thirty years. When he took to his bed he said to me, 'Ah! it is Fenil who is going to carry the day! Now that I am stricken down he will get the better of me.' That poor Compan whom I have seen so high-spirited and energetic at Saint-Saturnin's!"

The Abbé Faujas, who was stepping quickly along with a preoccupied air, kept perfectly silent, and did not seem to hear what his companion was saying.

"Has the bishop been informed?" he asked suddenly.

But the Abbé Bourrette in his turn now appeared to be buried in thought and he made no reply; but as they reached the Abbé Compan's door he said:

"Tell him that we have just met Fenil and that he bowed to us. It will please him and he will think that I shall be appointed vicar.

They went up the stairs in silence. The dying man's sister came to receive them. As she caught sight of the two priests she burst into tears, and stammered out through her sobs:

"It is all over! He has just passed away in my arms. I was quite alone with him. As he was dying, he looked round him and murmured, 'I must have the plague since they have all deserted me.' Ah! gentlemen, he died with his eyes filled with tears."

They went into the little room where the Abbé Compan seemed to be sleeping with his head on the pillow. His eyes had remained open, and his white and mournfully sad face was still weeping; the tears yet trickled down his cheeks. Then the Abbé Bourrette fell upon his knees, sobbing and praying, with his face pressed against the counterpane. The Abbé Faujas remained standing, gazing at the dead man; then, after having knelt down for a moment, he quietly went away. The Abbé Bourrette was so absorbed in his grief that he did not even hear him close the door.

The Abbé Faujas went straight to the bishop's. In Monseigneur Rousselot's antechamber he met the Abbé Surin, carrying a bundle of papers.

"Do you want to speak to his lordship?" the secretary asked, with his never-failing smile. "You have come at an unfortunate time. His lordship is so busy that he has given orders that no one is to be admitted to him."

"I want to see him on a very urgent matter," the Abbé Faujas said quietly. "You can at any rate let him know that I am here; and I will wait, if it is necessary."

"I am afraid that there would be no use in your doing

that. His lordship has several people with him. It would be better if you came again to-morrow."

But the Abbé took a chair, and just as he was doing so the bishop opened the door of his study. He appeared much vexed on seeing his visitor, whom he at first pretended not to recognize.

"My son," he said to Surin, "when you have arranged those papers, come to me immediately; there is a letter I want to dictate to you."

Then turning to the priest, who remained respectfully standing, he said:

"Ah! is that you, Monsieur Faujas? I am very glad to see you. Is there anything you want to say to me? Come into my study; you are never in the way."

Monseigneur Rousselot's study was a very large and rather gloomy room, in which a great wood fire was kept constantly burning, in the summer as well as the winter. The heavy carpet and curtains shut out all the air and the room felt like a warm bath. The bishop passed a chilly existence there in his arm-chair, like some dowager shutting herself up from the world, detesting all noise and excitement, and devolving upon the Abbé Fenil the care of his diocese. He delighted in the classics, and it was said that he was secretly making a translation of Horace. He was equally fond of the little verses of the Anthology, and broad quotations occasionally escaped from his lips, which he enjoyed with a learned naiveté quite insensible to vulgar modesty.

"There is no one here, you see," said he, sitting down before the fire; "but I am not feeling very well to-day, and I gave orders that nobody was to be admitted. Now you can tell me what you have to say; I am quite at your service."

His general expression of amiability was tinged with a kind of vague uneasiness and a sort of resigned sub-



mission. When the Abbé Faujas had informed him of the death of the Abbé Compan, he rose from his chair, seeming much distressed and annoyed.

"What!" he cried, "my good Compan dead and without my having been able to bid him farewell! No one gave me any warning! Ah, my friend, you were right when you gave me to understand that I was no longer master here. They abuse my kindness."

"Your lordship knows," said the Abbé Faujas, "how devoted I am to you. I am only waiting for a sign from you."

The bishop shook his head as he murmured:

"Yes, yes; I remember the offer you made to me. You have an excellent heart; but what an uproar there would be, if I were to break with the Abbé Fenil! I should have my ears deafened for a whole week! But yet if I could feel quite sure that you could really rid me of him."

The Abbé Faujas could not repress a smile. Tears were welling from the bishop's eyes.

Yes, I am afraid, I am afraid," the latter resumed, as he sank down again in his chair. "I don't feel equal to it yet. It is that miserable man who has killed Compan and who has kept his death-agony a secret from me that I might not go and close his eyes. He is capable of the most terrible things. And, as you see, I like to live in peace."

He grew calmer again and his smile returned.

"Besides, all is going on satisfactorily at present, and I don't see any immediate difficulty. We can wait."

The Abbé Faujas sat down as he replied calmly:

"No doubt; but still you will have to appoint a vicar for Saint-Saturnin's in succession to the Abbé Compan."

Monseigneur Rousselot lifted his hands to his temples with an expression of hopelessness.

"Indeed, you are right!" he ejaculated. "I had forgotten all about that. That good Compan doesn't know in what a hole he has put me by dying so suddenly without my having had any warning. I promised you the place, didn't I?"

The Abbé bowed.

"Well, my friend, you shall save me by letting me take back my word. You know how Fenil detests you. The success of the Home of the Virgin has made him quite furious, and he swears that he will prevent you from making the conquest of Plassans. I am talking to you, you see, quite openly. Recently, when reference has been made to the appointment of a vicar for Saint-Saturnin's, I have let fall your name. Fenil flew into a frightful rage and I was obliged to promise that I would give the place to a friend of his, the Abbé Chardon, whom you know, and who is really a very worthy man. Now, my friend, do this much for me, and give up this matter. I will make you whatever recompense you like to name."

The priest's face wore a grave expression. After a short interval of silence, during which he seemed to be taking counsel of himself, he spoke:

"You know well, my lord," he said, "that I am quite without personal ambition. I should much prefer to lead a life of privacy, and it would be a great relief to me to give up this appointment. But I am not my own master, and I feel bound to satisfy those patrons of mine who take an interest in me. I trust that your lordship will reflect very seriously before taking a step which you would probably regret afterward."

Although the Abbé Faujas spoke very humbly, the bishop was not unconscious of the menace which his words veiled. He rose from his chair and took a few steps about the room, a prey to the most painful doubt.

"Well, well," he said, lifting his hands, "this has been tormenting me for a long time. I should have much preferred avoiding all these explanations, but, since you insist, I must speak frankly. Well, my dear sir, the Abbé Fenil brings many charges against you. As I think I have told you before, he must have written to Besancon and learnt from thence all the vexatious stories you know of. You have certainly explained all those matters to me, and I am quite aware of your merits and of your life of penitence and solitude; but what can I do? Fenil has weapons against you and he uses them ruthlessly; I often don't know what to say in your defense. When the minister requested me to receive you into my diocese, I did not conceal from him that your position would be a difficult one; but he continued to press me and said that that was your affair, and so in the end I consented. But you must not come to-day and ask me to do what is impossible."

The Abbé Faujas had not lowered his head during the bishop's remarks, and now he raised it still higher as he looked him straight in the face and said in his sharp voice:

"You have given me your promise, my lord."

"Certainly, certainly," the bishop replied. "That poor Compan was getting weaker every day and you came and confided certain matters to me, and then I made the promise to you. I don't deny it. Listen to me, I will tell you everything, that you may not accuse me of wheeling round like a weather-cock. You asserted that the minister was extremely desirous for you to be appointed vicar of Saint-Saturnin's. Well, I wrote to obtain information on the subject, and a friend of mine went to the minister's office. They almost laughed in his face, and they told him that they didn't even know you. The minister absolutely denies that he is your supporter, do



you hear? If you wish it, I will read you a letter in which he makes some very stern remarks about you."

He stretched out his arms toward a drawer, but the Abbé Faujas rose to his feet without taking his eyes off the bishop, while he smiled with mingled irony and pity.

"Ah, my lord! my lord!" he said.

Then, after a moment's silence, as though he were unwilling to enter into further explanations, he said:

"I give your lordship back your promise; but believe that in all this I was working more for your own advantage than for mine. By and by, when it will be too late, you will call my warnings to mind."

He stepped toward the door, but the bishop laid his hand upon him and brought him back, saying with an expression of uneasiness:

"What do you mean? Explain yourself, my dear Monsieur Faujas. I know very well that I am not in favor at Paris since the election of the Marquis de Lagrifoul. But they know me very little if they suppose that I had any hand in the matter. I don't go out of my study twice in a month. Do you imagine that they accuse me of having caused the marquis' nomination?"

"Yes, I am afraid so," the priest replied shortly.

"But it is quite absurd! I have never interfered in politics; I live amongst my beloved books. It is Fenil who has done it all. I have told him a score of times that he would end by compromising me at Paris."

He checked himself and blushed slightly at having allowed these last words to escape him. The Abbé Faujas sat down again in front of him and said in deep tones:

"My lord, you have just condemned your vicar-general. I have never given you any other advice. Do not continue to make common cause with him or he will lead

you into serious trouble. I have friends at Paris, whatever you may believe. Rightly or wrongly they believe that you are the sole cause of the opposition movement which has manifested itself in Plassans, where the minister, for special reasons, is most anxious to have a majority. If the legitimist candidate should again succeed at the next election, it would be very awkward, and I should be considerably alarmed for your comfort."

"But this is abominable!" cried the unhappy bishop, rocking himself in his chair; "I can't prevent the legitimist candidate from being returned! Really there are times when I feel that I should like to go and shut myself up in a monastery. It is Fenil who ought to be bishop instead of me. If I were to listen to Fenil, I should get completely on bad terms with the government. I should hearken only to Rome, and tell Paris to mind its own business. The minister then, you say, is enraged with me?"

The priest made no reply. Two creases at the corners of his mouth gave to his face an expression of silent scorn.

"Really," continued the bishop, "if I thought it would please him if I were to appoint you vicar of Saint-Saturnin's, I would try to manage it. But I can assure you that you are mistaken. You are but very little in the odor of sanctity."

The Abbé Faujas made a hasty movement of his hands, as he broke out impatiently:

"Have you forgotten," he said, "that calumnies are circulated about me, and that I came to Plassans with a soiled cassock? When they send a compromised man to a post of danger, they deny all knowledge of him till the day of triumph. Help me to succeed, my lord, and then you will see that I have friends at Paris."

Then, as the bishop, in surprise at the energy of the

adventurous priest, continued to gaze at him in silence, the latter lapsed into a less assertive manner as he continued.

"These, however, are suppositions, and what I mean is, that I have much to be pardoned. My friends are waiting to thank you till my position is completely established."

Monseigneur Rousselot kept silence for a moment longer. He was a man of sharp understanding, and he had gained a knowledge of human failings from books. In the life which he led of a learned epicurean, there were times when he felt a supreme amusement at the ambitious men about him, who fought amongst themselves for a few stray shreds of his power.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "you are a persistent man, my dear Monsieur Faujas, and since I have made you a promise I will keep it. Six months ago, I confess, I should have been afraid of stirring up all Plassans against me, but in appointing you vicar of Saint-Saturnin's, I am only paying the debt which we owe you for the Home of the Virgin."

The bishop had recovered all his pleasant amiability and charming manner. Just at this moment the Abbé Surin put his handsome head through the doorway.

"No, my child," said the bishop to him, "I shall not dictate that letter to you. I have no further need of you, and you can go away."

"The Abbé Fenil is here," said the young priest.

"Oh very well, let him wait!"

Monseigneur Rousselot winced slightly; but he spoke to his secretary with an expression of almost cheerful decision, and he looked at the Abbé Faujas with a glance of intelligence.

"See! go out this way," he said to him as he opened a door that was hidden behind a curtain.



He kept the priest standing on the threshold for a moment, and continued to look at him with a smile on his face.

"Fenil will be furious," he said; "but you will promise to defend me against him if he is too hard upon me? I am making him your enemy, I warn you of that. I am counting upon you, too, to prevent the re-election of the Marquis de Lagrifoul. Ah! it is upon you that I am leaning now, my dear Monsieur Faujas."

He waved his white hand to the Abbé, and then he returned with an appearance of perfect unconcern to the warmth of his study. The priest had retained his humble demeanor, feeling surprised at the quite feminine ease with which the bishop changed from the attitude of master and yielded to the stronger side. And it was only after they had parted that he began to feel that Monseigneur Rousselot had just been secretly laughing at him, as he laughed at the Abbé Fenil in that downy arm-chair of his where he read his Horace.

About ten o'clock on the following Thursday, just when the fashionable society of Plassans were treading on each other's feet in the Rougons' green drawing-room, the Abbé Faujas appeared at the door. He looked tall and majestic, and there was a bright color on his cheeks, and he wore a brand-new cassock that glistened like satin. His face was still grave, though there was a slight smile upon it, just the pleasant turn of the lips that was necessary to light up his stern countenance with a ray of cheerfulness.

"Ah! here is the dear vicar!" Madame de Condamin cried gayly.

The Abbé Faujas bowed with easy composure. All around him there was immediately a flattering ovation in his honor, a buzzing of enthusiastic women. Madame Delangre and Madame Rastoil did not wait till he came

up to them, but they at once hastened to congratulate him upon his appointment, which had been officially announced that morning. The mayor, the magistrate, and even Monsieur de Bourdeu, all stepped up to him and shook his hand heartily.

"Ah, he's a fine fellow and will go a long way!" Monsieur de Condamin murmured into Doctor Porquier's ear. "I scented him from the first day I saw him. That grimacing old Madame Rougon and he tell no end of lies. They must be mixed up in some queer things, together."

Doctor Porquier was terribly afraid of being compromised by Monsieur de Condamin, and so he hurried away from him, and hastened, like the others, to grasp the Abbé Faujas' hand, although he had never spoken a word to him.

The priest's triumphal entry was the great event of the evening. He had now seated himself and he was hemmed in by a triple circle of petticoats. He talked with a charming sprightliness and spoke on all sorts of subjects, but carefully avoided replying to any hints or allusions. When Felicité questioned him directly, he merely said that he should not occupy the vicarage and that he preferred remaining in the lodgings where he had been so comfortable for nearly three years. Marthe was present among the other ladies, and was, as usual, extremely reserved. She had only just smiled at the Abbé, watching him from the distance, looking a little pale and seeming rather weary and uneasy. When he signified his intention of not quitting the Rue Balande, she blushed and rose from her seat and went into the small drawing-room, appearing to feel suffocated with the heat. Madame Paloque, beside whom Monsieur de Condamin had seated himself, sniggered as she said to him quite loud enough to be heard:

"It's very decorous, isn't it? She certainly might refrain from making assignations with him here, since they have the whole day to themselves!"

About the middle of the evening the Abbé Bourrette arrived. Conversation ceased and everyone looked at him with curiosity. They all knew that he had been expecting to be appointed vicar of Saint-Saturnin's himself. He had taken the Abbé Compan's duties during his long illness, and he had a lien upon the appointment. He lingered for a moment by the door, a little out of breath, then, catching sight of the Abbé Faujas, he hastened eagerly up to him, and seizing both his hands with a show of much pleasure he exclaimed:

"Ah! my dear friend, let me congratulate you! I have just come from your rooms, where your mother told me that you were here. I am delighted to see you."

The Abbé Faujas had risen from his seat, and notwithstanding his great self-control, he seemed annoyed, taken by surprise by this unexpected display of affection.

"Yes," he murmured, "I felt bound to accept his lordship's offer in spite of my lack of merit. I refused it, indeed, at first, mentioning to his lordship the names of more deserving priests than myself. I mentioned your own name."

The Abbé Bourrette blinked his eyes, and taking the Abbé Faujas aside he said to him in low tones:

"His lordship has told me all about it. Fenil, it seems, would not hear of me. He would have set the whole diocese in a blaze if I had been appointed. Those were his very words. My crime is having closed poor Compan's eyes. He demanded, as you know, the appointment of the Abbé Chardon, a pious man no doubt, but not of sufficient reputation. Fenil counted upon reigning at Saint-Saturnin's in his name. It was then that his lordship determined to give you the place and



checkmate him. I am quite avenged, and I am delighted, my dear friend. Did you know the full story?"

"No, not in all its details."

"Well, it is all just as I have told you, I can assure you. I have the facts from his lordship's own lips. Between ourselves, he has hinted to me of a very sufficient recompense. The deputy vicar-general, the Abbé Vial, has for a long time been desirous of going and settling in Rome, and his place will be vacant, you understand. But don't say anything about this. I wouldn't take a big sum of money for my day's work."

The Abbé Bourrette was sharing in the general triumph when Madame Paloque, craning out her hideous face, touched him on the shoulder while she murmured in his ear:

"Your reverence won't then, I suppose, hear confessions to-morrow in Saint-Michael's chapel?"

The priest, while he had been taking the Abbé Compan's duty, had occupied the confessional in Saint-Michael's chapel, which was the largest and most convenient in the church and was specially reserved for the vicar. He did not at first understand the force of Madame Paloque's observation, and he looked at her, blinking his eyes.

"I am asking," she continued, "if you will resume your old confessional in the chapel of the Holy Angels, to-morrow."

He turned a little pale and continued silent for a moment or two longer. He bent his gaze to the floor, and a slight shiver ran over the back of his neck, as though he had received a blow from behind. Then, seeing that Madame Paloque was still there staring at him, he stammered out:

"Certainly; I shall resume my old confessional. Come to the chapel of the Holy Angels, the last one to the

left on the same side as the cloisters. It is very damp, so wrap yourself up well, my dear madame, wrap yourself up well."

The tears rose to his eyes. He was filled with a regretful longing for the handsome confessional in the chapel of Saint-Michael, into which the warm sun streamed in the afternoon just at the time when he heard confessions. Madame Paloque told him in her loud voice that he appeared to have grown melancholy all at once, but he protested against this and tried to smile and look cheerful again. He left the drawing-room early in the evening.

The Abbé Faujas was one of the last to go. Rougon came up to him to offer his congratulations and they sat talking earnestly together on a couch. They spoke of the necessity of religious feeling in a wisely ordered state. Each lady, on retiring from the room, made a low bow as she passed in front of him.

"You know, your reverence," Felicité said graciously, "that you are my daughter's cavalier."

The priest rose from his seat. Marthe was waiting for him at the door. When they got into the street, they seemed as though they were blinded by the darkness, and they crossed the Place of the Sub-Prefecture without a word passing between them; but in the Rue Balande, as they stood in front of the house, Marthe touched the priest's arm just as he was going to put the key into the lock.

"I am so very pleased at your success," she said to him, in tones of great emotion. "Be kind to me to day, and grant me the favor which you have hitherto refused. I assure you that the Abbé Bourrette does not understand me. It is only you who can direct me and save me."

He motioned her away from him, and, when he had opened the door and lighted the little lamp which Rose

had left at the foot of the staircase, he went up the stairs, saying to her gently as he did so:

"You promised me to be reasonable, and I will think over what you have asked. We will talk about it."

Marthe did not retire to her own room until she had heard the priest close his door on the upper floor. She paid no attention, while she was undressing and getting to bed, to Mouret, who, half asleep, was retailing to her at great length the gossiping stories that were being circulated in the town. He had been at his club, the Commercial Club, a place where he rarely set foot.

"The Abbé Faujas has got the better of the Abbé Bourrette," he repeated for the tenth time as he slowly rolled his head upon the pillow. "Poor Abbé Bourrette! Well, never mind! it's good fun to see these parsons devouring each other. Why don't you say anything, my dear? You don't agree with me, eh? Or is it because you are going to sleep? Well, well, good-night then, my dear."

He fell asleep, still muttering fragments of sentences, while Marthe, with widely opened eyes, stared up into the air and followed over the ceiling that was lighted by the night-light the pattering of the Abbé's slippers while he was preparing to go to bed.

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## XII

Upon the return of the summer the Abbé Faujas and his mother again came down-stairs to enjoy the fresh air on the terrace. Mouret had become very cross-grained. He declined the old lady's invitations to play piquet and he sat swaying himself about on a chair. Seeing him yawn, without making any attempt to conceal how bored he was feeling, Marthe said to him:



"Why don't you go to your club, my dear?"

He went there now more frequently than he had been used to do. When he returned he found his wife and the Abbé still in the same place on the terrace, while Madame Faujas, a few yards away from them, maintained her attitude of a blind and dumb guardian.

When anyone in the town spoke to Mouret of the new vicar, he still continued to be very loud in his praises of him. He was, he said, decidedly a superior sort of man, and he himself had never felt any doubt of his great abilities.

"Your husband, then, has become reasonable at last?" Felicité remarked to her daughter one day. "He leaves you free."

Marthe looked at her mother with an air of surprise.

"I have always been free," she said.

"Ah! my dear child, I see you don't want to say anything against him. You told me once that he looked very unfavorably upon the Abbé Faujas."

"Nothing of the kind, I assure you! You must have imagined it. My husband is upon the best terms with the Abbé Faujas. There is nothing whatever to make them otherwise."

Marthe was much astonished at the persistence with which everybody seemed to imagine that her husband and the Abbé were not good friends. Frequently, at the committee-meetings at the Home of the Virgin, the ladies put questions to her which made her quite impatient. She was really very happy and contented, and the house in the Rue Balande had never seemed pleasanter to her than it did now. The Abbé Faujas had given her to understand that he would undertake her spiritual direction when he was of opinion that the Abbé Bourrette was no longer sufficient, and she lived with this hope filling her mind with a simple joy, like some girl at her first com-

munion who is promised some holy picture if she keeps good.

Since his appointment as vicar of Saint-Saturnin's, the Abbé Faujas had shown a gentle dignity which seemed to be increasing. He carried his breviary and his hat with an air of authority, and he had exhibited such powers at the cathedral as had insured him the respect of the clergy. The Abbé Fenil, receiving another defeat on two or three matters of detail, now seemed to have left his adversary in unopposed control. The Abbé Faujas, however, was not foolish enough to make any indiscreet use of his triumph, and he showed himself extremely humble and meek. He was quite conscious that a large section of society in the town still looked upon him with suspicion. They found fault with him for the want of explicitness in his political opinions. But the Abbé only smiled and said that he belonged to the honest men's party, a reply which saved him a more explicit declaration. He showed no haste or anxiety, but continued to hold himself aloof till the drawing-rooms should open their doors to him of their own accord.

"No, my friend, not now; later on we will see about it," he said to the Abbé Bourrette who had been pressing him to pay a visit to Monsieur Rastoil.

He was known to have refused two invitations to the Sub-Prefecture, and the Mourets were still the only people with whom he allowed himself to be intimate.

He was quite at home now in Mouret's garden. He no longer confined himself to pacing up and down beneath the arbor as he read his breviary but he strolled freely about the walks and paths, and his cassock glided blackly past all the greenery. One Tuesday, as he was making the tour of the garden, he caught sight of Monsieur Maffre and Madame Rastoil below him and bowed to them, and then as he passed along under the terrace of the Sub-

Prefecture, he saw Monsieur de Condamin leaning there in company with Doctor Porquier. After an exchange of salutations, the priest was going to return along the path, when the doctor called to him.

"Just a word, your reverence, I beg."

Then he asked him at what time he could see him on the following day. This was the first occasion upon which anyone of the two sets of guests had spoken to the priest from one garden to the other. The doctor was in great trouble. His scamp of a son had just been caught in a disorderly house behind the gaol in company with a troop of other worthless characters. The most distressing part of the matter was that Guillaume was accused of being the leader of the band and of having led astray Monsieur Maffre's sons, who were much younger than himself.

"Pooh!" Monsieur de Condamin said, with his skeptical laugh; "young men must sow their wild oats. What a fuss about nothing! Here's the whole town in a state of perturbation because these young fellows have been caught playing baccarat and there happened to be a lady with them!"

The doctor seemed very much shocked.

"I want to ask your advice," he said, addressing himself to the priest. "Monsieur Maffre came to my house boiling over with anger, and assailed me with the bitterest reproaches, crying out that it was all my fault and that I had brought up my son badly. Monsieur Maffre ought to know me better. I have sixty years of stainless life behind me."

He went on wailing and dwelling upon the sacrifices he had made for his son and expressing fears that he would lose his practice in consequence of the young man's misconduct. The Abbé Faujas, standing in the middle of the path, raised his head and listened to him gravely.



"I shall be only too glad if I can be of any service to you," he said kindly. "I will see Monsieur Maffre and will let him understand that his natural indignation has carried him too far. I will go at once and ask him to appoint a meeting with me for to-morrow. He is over there, on the other side."

The Abbé crossed the garden and went over toward Monsieur Maffre, who was still there with Madame Rastoil. When the magistrate found that the priest desired an interview with him, he would not hear of his giving himself any trouble about it, but said that he would have the honor of calling upon him the next day.

"Ah! your reverence," Madame Rastoil said, "let me compliment you upon your sermon last Sunday. All the ladies were much affected by it, I can assure you."

The Abbé bowed and crossed the garden again to reassure Doctor Porquier. Then he continued slowly pacing up and down the walks till night-fall, without taking part in any further conversations, and still hearing the merriment of the two groups of guests on his right hand and on his left.

When Monsieur Maffre appeared the next day, the Abbé Faujas was watching through his window a couple of men who were at work repairing the fountain in the garden. He had expressed a desire to see the jet playing again; the empty basin, he said, had a melancholy appearance. Mouret did not seem very willing to have anything done, alleging the probability of accidents, but Marthe prevailed upon him to let the repairs be executed upon the understanding that the basin should be protected by a railing.

"Your reverence," said Rose, "his worship the magistrate wants to see you."

The Abbé Faujas hastened down-stairs. He wanted to bring Monsieur Maffre up to his own room on the second

floor, but Rose had already opened the drawing-room door.

"Go in," she said; "aren't you at home here? There is no use in making his worship go up two flights of stairs. If you had only told me this morning, I would have given the room a dusting."

As she was closing the door upon the Abbé and the magistrate, after having opened the shutters, Mouret called her into the dining-room.

"That's right, Rose," he cried, "you had better give my dinner to your priest this evening, and if he hasn't got sufficient blankets of his own up-stairs you can put him into my bed."

The cook exchanged a meaning glance with Marthe, who was working by the window, waiting till the sun had left the terrace. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she said:

"Ah! sir, you have never had a charitable heart!"

In the drawing-room the Abbé Faujas was gently remonstrating with Monsieur Maffre, telling him that the Doctor Porquier was a religious man and a person of the highest integrity, and that no one was more pained than he himself by his son's deplorable conduct. The magistrate allowed that he had been too hot-headed, and he said that he was willing to make every apology as his reverence thought he had been in the wrong.

"You must send your sons to me," said the priest, "and I will talk to them."

Monsieur Maffre shook his head with a slight laugh.

"Oh! you needn't be afraid about them, your reverence. The young scamps won't play any more of their tricks. They have been locked up in their rooms for these last three days with nothing but bread and water. If I had had a stick in my hand when I found out what they had been doing, I should have broken it across their backs."

The Abbé looked at him and recollected how Mouret had accused him of having killed his wife by his harshness and avarice; then, with a gesture of protestation, he added:

"No, no; that is not the way to treat young men. Your elder son, Ambroise, is twenty years old and the younger is nearly eighteen, isn't he? They are no longer children, remember. You must allow them some amusements."

The magistrate was silent with surprise.

"Then you would let them go on smoking and allow them to frequent the café?" he said, presently.

"Certainly," replied the priest, with a smile. "I think that young men should be allowed to meet together to talk and smoke their cigarettes and even to play a game of billiards or chess. They will give themselves every license if you show them no toleration. Only remember that it is not to every café that I should be willing for them to go. I should like to see a special one provided for them, a sort of club, as I have seen done in several towns."

Then he unfolded a complete scheme for such a club. Monsieur Maffre seemed to gradually take it in and appreciate it. He nodded his head as he said:

"Capital, capital! It would be a worthy pendant to the Home of the Virgin. Really, your reverence, we must put such a splendid idea as this into execution."

"Well, then," the priest concluded, as he accompanied Monsieur Maffre to the door, "since you approve of the plan, just advocate it to your friends. I will see Monsieur Delangre, and speak to him about it. We might meet in the cathedral on Sunday after vespers and come to some decision."

On the Sunday, Monsieur Maffre brought Monsieur Rastoil with him. They found the Abbé Faujas and



Monsieur Delangre in a little room adjoining the sacristy. The gentlemen showed great enthusiasm in favor of the priest's idea, and the institution of a young men's club was agreed upon in principle. There was considerable discussion, however, as to what it should be called. Monsieur Maffre was strongly wishful for it to be known as the Guild of Jesus.

"Oh, no! no!" the priest at last cried impatiently. "You would get scarcely any one to join, and the few members would only be jeered at. There must be no attempt to tack religion onto the business; indeed, I intend that we should leave religion outside its doors altogether. All we want to do is to win the young people over to our side by providing them with some innocent recreation; that's all."

The magistrate gazed at the priest with such an expression of astonishment and anxiety that Monsieur Delangre was obliged to bend his head down to conceal a smile, while he shyly pulled the Abbé's cassock. The priest went on in calmer tones:

"I am sure, gentlemen, that you do not feel any distrust of me, and I ask you to leave the management of the matter in my hands. I propose to adopt some very simple name such a one, for instance, as the Young Men's Club, which quite expresses all that is required."

Monsieur Rastoil and Monsieur Maffre bowed, although this title seemed to them a little weak. They next spoke of nominating the vicar as president of a provisional committee.

"I fancy," said Monsieur Delangre, glancing at the priest, "that that will scarcely meet with his reverence's approbation."

"Oh dear, no!" the Abbé exclaimed, slightly shrugging his shoulders. "My cassock would frighten away the timid and luke-warm. We should only get the pious

young people, and it is not for them that we are going to found our club. What we want is to gather in the wanderers; to win converts, in a word; isn't that so?"

"Clearly," replied the president.

"Very well, then, it will be better for us to keep ourselves in the background, myself especially. What I propose is this; your son, Monsieur Rastoil, and yours, Monsieur Delangre, will alone come forward. It must be they who must appear to have conceived the idea of this club. Send them to me in the morning, and I will talk the matter over at length with them. I have already a suitable building in my mind and a code of rules quite prepared. Your two sons, Monsieur Maffre, will naturally be enrolled at the head of the list of members."

The president seemed flattered at the part that was assigned to his son; and so matters were arranged in this way, notwithstanding the resistance of the magistrate, who had hoped to win some distinction from the founding of the club. The next day Séverin Rastoil and Lucien Delangre put themselves in communication with the Abbé Faujas. Séverin was a tall young man of five-and-twenty, with a badly shaped skull and a dull brain, who had just been called to the bar, thanks to the position which his father held. The latter was anxiously dreaming of making him an assistant prosecutor, despairing of his ever succeeding in winning any practice for himself. Lucien, on the other hand, was short and sharp-eyed, and he had a crafty brain and pleaded with all the coolness of an old practitioner, although he was a year younger than Séverin. The "Plassans Gazette" spoke of him as a future light of the bar. It was especially to him that the Abbé gave the minutest instructions as to his scheme. The president's son went fussing about, bursting with importance. In three weeks the Young Men's Club was founded and opened.

Doctor Porquier heard of the solution of the *Maffre* affair *imbroglio* when he was in the garden of the Sub-Prefecture. He immediately hastened onto the terrace. It was the time when the Abbé Faujas read his breviary. Doctor Porquier caught sight of him under the Mourets' arbor.

"Ah! your reverence!" he cried, "how can I thank you? I should like very much to shake hands with you."

"The wall is rather high," said the priest, looking at it with a smile.

But Doctor Porquier was a man full of energy, and was not to be discouraged by obstacles.

"Wait a moment!" he cried. "If your reverence will allow me, I will come round."

Then he disappeared. The Abbé, still smiling, bent his steps slowly toward the little door which opened into the Chevillottes alley. The doctor was already gently knocking at it.

"Ah! this door is nailed up," said the priest. "One of the nails is broken though. If one had any sort of tool, there would be no difficulty in getting the other one out."

He glanced round him and caught sight of a spade. Then, with a slight effort, he opened the door, after he had drawn back the bolts, and stepped out into the Chevillottes alley, where Doctor Porquier overwhelmed him with thanks and compliments. As they walked along the alley, talking, Monsieur Maffre, who happened at the time to be in Monsieur Rastoil's garden, opened the little door that was hidden away behind the water-fall. The gentlemen were much amused to find themselves all three in this deserted little alley.

They remained there for a few moments, and, when they took leave of the Abbé, the magistrate and the



doctor poked their heads inside the Mourets' garden, and looked about with curiosity.

Mouret, however, who was putting in stakes for his tomatoes, caught sight of them as he raised his head. He was lost in astonishment.

"Hallo! so they've made their way in here now!" he murmured to himself. "The vicar has only got now to bring in the two tribes!"

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### XIII

Serge was now nineteen years of age. He occupied a small room on the second floor, opposite to the priest's, where he led an almost cloistered life, spending much time in reading.

"I shall have to throw those old books of yours into the fire," Mouret said to him angrily. "You'll end by making yourself ill and having to take to your bed."

The young man was, indeed, of such a nervous temperament, that the slightest imprudence brought on ailments in him which frequently confined him to his room for two or three days together. At these times Rose inundated him with decoctions, and when Mouret went upstairs to shake his son up a little, as he called it, the cook, if she happened to be there, would turn her master out of the room and cry out at him:

"Leave the poor dear alone! Can't you see that you are killing him with your rough ways? It isn't after you that he takes; he is the very image of his mother; and you'll never be able to understand either the one or the other of them."

Serge smiled. His father, seeing him so delicate, had hesitated to send him to read for the bar at Paris after leaving college. He instilled ambitious ideas into the lad,

and told him that many with much weaker wits than his own, his cousins, the Rougons, for instance, had attained to great distinction. Every time that the young man seemed getting more robust, his father settled that he should leave home early in the following month; but his trunk never got packed, for Serge would get a slight cough and then his departure would be again postponed.

On each of these occasions Marthe contented herself by saying with affectionate indifference:

"He isn't twenty yet. It is really not quite prudent to send so young a lad to Paris; and, besides, he isn't wasting his time here; you even think, you know, that he works too hard."

Serge used to go with his mother to mass. He was very piously minded, and was very gentle and grave. Doctor Porquier had recommended him to take a good deal of exercise, and he had become enthusiastically fond of botany, going off on long rambles to collect specimens which he spent his afternoons in drying and mounting and classifying and naming. It was about that time that he struck up a great friendship with the Abbé Faujas. The Abbé had botanized in earlier days, and he gave Serge much practical advice for which the young man was very grateful. They lent each other books, and one day they went off together to try to discover a certain plant which the priest said he thought would be found in the neighborhood. When Serge was ill, his neighbor came to see him every morning, and he sat and talked for a long time at his bedside. At other times, when the young man was well, it was he who went and knocked at the Abbé Faujas' door, as soon as he heard him stirring in his room. They were only separated by a narrow landing, and they ended by almost living together.

Serge naturally joined the Young Men's Club, though he

went there but little, preferring the solitude of his own room. If it had not been for the Abbé Faujas, whom he sometimes met there, he would probably never have set his foot in the place. The Abbé taught him to play chess in the reading-room. Mouret, who knew that the lad met the priest at the café, swore that he would pack him off by the train on the following Monday. His luggage was got ready, and quite seriously this time, when Serge, who had gone out to spend a last day in the open country, returned home drenched to the skin by a sudden down-pour of rain. He was obliged to go to bed and his teeth chattered with fever. For three weeks he hung between life and death, and his convalescence lingered during two long months, and at the commencement of it he was so weak that he lay with his head on the pillow and his arms stretched over the sheets like a wax figure.

"It is your fault, sir!" cried the cook to Mouret. "You will have it on your conscience if the boy dies."

While his son continued in danger, Mouret wandered silently about the house, plunged in a gloomy melancholy, and with his eyes red with crying. He seldom went up stairs but paced up and down the passage, waiting to intercept the doctor as he went away. When he was told that Serge was at length out of danger, he glided quietly into his room and offered his help. But Rose turned him away. Then Mouret remained in complete loneliness downstairs, more melancholy and unoccupied than ever. He felt no inclination for anything, he said. As he went along the passage, he often heard on the second floor the voice of the Abbé Faujas, who spent the whole afternoon by Serge's bedside, now that he was growing better.

"How is he, to-day, your reverence?" Mouret asked the priest timidly, as he met the latter going down into the garden.



"Oh, fairly well; but it will be a long convalescence, and very great care will be required."

As his son's convalescence progressed, he remarked that the priest scarcely ever left Serge's room. He had gone upstairs several times in the women's absence, and he had always found the Abbé at the young man's bedside, talking softly to him, and rendering him all kinds of little services, sweetening his drink, straightening his bedclothes, or getting him anything he happened to want. Mouret seemed to smell the odor of incense in the house, and he could almost fancy sometimes, as he heard the muttered voices, that they were saying mass upstairs.

"What can they be doing?" he wondered. "The youngster is out of danger now; they can't be giving him extreme unction."

Serge himself caused him much disquiet. He looked like a girl as he lay in his white night-dress. His eyes seemed to have grown larger, and there was a soft ecstatic smile upon his lips, which still played there even in the midst of his keenest pangs of suffering. Mouret no longer ventured to say anything about Paris; his dear sick boy seemed too girlish and tender for such a subject.

One afternoon he went upstairs, carefully hushing the sound of his steps. Through the half-opened door he saw Serge sitting in an easy-chair in the sunshine. The young man was crying with his eyes turned up to the sky, while his mother was sobbing in front of him. As soon as Mouret entered the room, the invalid said to him in his feeble voice:

"I have a favor to ask you, father. My mother says that you will be angry and will refuse me a permission which would fill me with joy. I want to enter the Seminary."

He clasped his hands together in a sort of feverish devotion.

"You! you!" exclaimed Mouret.

He looked at Marthe, who turned away her head. He said nothing further, but walked to the window and then returned and sat down mechanically by the side of the bed, as though overwhelmed by some blow.

"Father," Serge resumed after a long silence, "in my nearness to death I have seen God, and I have sworn to be His. I assure you all my happiness is centered in that. Believe me that it is so, and do not cause me grief."

Mouret still kept silence. His face was very somber and his eyes sought the ground. At last, with an expression of utter hopelessness, he murmured:

"If I had the least particle of courage, I should wrap up a couple of shirts in a handkerchief and go away."

Then he rose from his seat, went to the window and began to drum on the panes with his fingers; and when Serge again commenced to implore him, he said very quietly:

"Very well, my boy; be a priest."

Then he left the room. The next day, without the least warning to any one, he set off for Marseilles, where he spent a week with his son Octave. He came back looking care-worn and aged. Octave had afforded him very little consolation. He had found the young man leading a fast life, overwhelmed with debt and hiding his mistresses in wardrobes. However, he did not say a word about these matters. He began to lead a perfectly sedentary life, and no longer made any of those good strokes of business, those fortunate purchases of standing crops, in which he had formerly taken such a pride. Rose noticed that he maintained an almost un-

broken silence and that he even avoided saluting the Abbé Faujas.

Then Mouret went up to the first floor, and shut himself up in a room which he called his study, a great bare room, furnished only with a table and a couple of chairs. This room became his refuge at the times when the cook worried him. Every day his wife was withdrawing herself more and more from what concerned him, and she even began to fancy, now that the house seemed so quiet and peaceful and she had ceased to hear Mouret scolding angrily, that he had grown more reasonable and had discovered for himself, as she had done, some little nook of happiness. This thought had a calming influence upon her, and tended to plunge her more deeply in her dreamy life. When her husband looked at her with his troubled eyes, scarcely recognizing in her his wife of other days, she only smiled at him and did not notice the tears which were swelling beneath his eyelids.

On the day that Serge, now completely restored to health, entered the Seminary, Mouret remained at home alone with Désirée. He frequently kept her with him now. This great girl, who was now nearly sixteen, would have been as likely to fall into the basin of the fountain or to set the house on fire by playing with matches as a child of six. When Marthe returned home, she found the doors open and the rooms empty. The house seemed quite deserted. She went down onto the terrace, and there, at the end of one of the walks, she saw her husband playing with his daughter. He was sitting on the ground upon the gravel, and was gravely filling with a little wooden scoop a cart which Désirée was pulling with a piece of string.

"Gee up! gee up!" cried the girl.

"Wait a little," said her father patiently, "it is not



full yet. As you are the horse, you must wait till the cart is full."

Then she scraped her feet like an impatient horse and at last, not being able to stand still any longer, she set off with a loud burst of laughter. The cart fell over and lost its load. When she had dragged it round the garden, she came back to her father, crying out:

"Fill it again! Fill it again!"

Mouret loaded it again with the little scoop. Marthe had remained upon the terrace watching them, filled with uneasy emotion. The open doors, the sight of the man playing with the child, the empty deserted house, all touched her with a feeling of sadness, without her being clearly conscious of what it was that was affecting her. She went upstairs to take off her things, and heard Rose, who had also just then returned, exclaiming from the terrace steps:

"Good gracious! how silly the master is!"

His friends, the retired traders with whom he took a turn or two every day on the promenade in the Cours Sauvaire, declared that he was a little "touched." During the last few months his hair had grown grizzled, and he had begun to get shaky upon his legs, and he was no longer the biting jeerer, feared by the whole town. For a little time it was thought that he had been venturing upon some risky speculation and was overcome by a heavy loss of money.

Madame Paloque, as she leaned against the window of her dining-room which looked into the Rue Balande, said, every time she saw him, that he was certainly going to the bad. And if, a few minutes later, she happened to catch sight of the Abbé Faujas passing along the street, she took a delight in exclaiming, the more especially if she had visitors with her:

"Just look at his reverence, the vicar! Isn't he grow-

ing sleek? If he eats out of the same dish as Mouret, he can't leave him anything but the bones."

Then she laughed, as did those who heard her. The Abbé Faujas was, indeed, becoming quite an imposing object; he now always wore black gloves and a shimmering cassock. A peculiar smile played about his face, a sort of ironical twist of his lips, when Madame de Condamin complimented him upon his appearance. Since the foundation of the Home of the Virgin, all the women had been on his side; and they defended him against the calumnious stories which were still occasionally repeated, without anyone being able to clearly get at their origin. Now and then they found him a little blunt, but this roughness of his by no means offended them, least of all in the confessional, where they rather liked to feel his iron hand pressing down upon their necks.

"He gave me such a scolding yesterday, my dear," Madame Condamin said to Marthe one day. "I believe he would have struck me if there had not been the partition between us. He is not always very easy to get on with!"

She laughed gently and seemed to be enjoying the recollection of this scene with her director.

When the Abbé Faujas had founded the Young Men's Club, he became quite sociable and gay; he seemed to have undergone a transformation. His stern nature molded itself like soft wax beneath the pressure of a strong effort of his will. He allowed the part which he had taken in the founding of the club to be made public, and he became the friend of all the young men in the town, and he kept a strict watch over his manner, knowing well that young men just fresh from college have not the same taste for roughness of speech and demeanor as women have.

Though the Abbé had conquered the women and the

young men, the elderly gentlemen continued to distrust him as they saw him still refraining from identifying himself with any political party. At the Sub-Prefecture Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies discussed him with much animation, while Monsieur Delangre, without positively defending him, said that they ought to wait before judging him. At Monsieur Rastoil's he had become a source of much tribulation to the president. Séverin and his mother never ceased wearying him with their constant eulogies of the priest.

Monsieur Rastoil shrugged his shoulders. When Monsieur de Bourdeu was there, the pair of them accused the Abbé Faujas of leanings toward the Sub-Prefecture though Madame Rastoil directed their attention to the fact that he never dined there, and that he had never even set foot in the house.

"Oh, don't imagine that I am accusing him of being a Bonapartist," said the president. "I only remarked that he had leanings that way; that was all. He has had communications with Monsieur Delangre."

"Well! and so have you!" cried Séverin; "you have had communications with the mayor! They are absolutely necessary under certain circumstances. Tell the truth and say you detest the Abbé Faujas; it will be much more straightforward."

Séverin now began to go and knock at the little door in the Chevillottes alley whenever he wanted to say anything to the priest, and gradually the alley became a sort of neutral ground. Doctor Porquier, who had been the first to avail himself of it, young Delangre, and the magistrate, all came there to talk to the Abbé Faujas. Sometimes the little doors of both the gardens, as well as the cart-entrance to the Sub-Prefecture, were kept open for a whole afternoon, while the Abbé was leaning against the wall at the end of the blind alley smil-



ing and shaking hands with the members of the two groups of guests who were wishful to come and have a word with him. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, however, carefully refrained from leaving the garden of the Sub-Prefecture; and Monsieur Rastoil and Monsieur de Bourdeu were equally persistent in never showing themselves in the alley, remaining seated beneath trees in front of the waterfall. It was but very seldom that the priest's little court invaded the Mourets' arbor. Now and then a head just peeped inside, took a hasty glance round and quickly disappeared.

The Abbé Faujas now seemed quite at ease. He scarcely ever glanced with a look of disquietude at the windows of the Trouches, through which Olympe's eyes were constantly glistening. The Trouches kept themselves in ambush there behind the crimson curtains, consumed by an envious desire to come down like the Abbé and eat the fruit, and talk to the fashionable society.

"It is really too abominable!" Olympe exclaimed one day to her husband. "He would lock us up in a cupboard if he could, so as to deprive us of every atom of enjoyment. We will go down if you like, and we will see what he says."

Trouche had just returned from his office. He put on a clean collar and dusted his boots, anxious to make himself as neat as possible. Olympe put on a light dress, and then they both boldly went downstairs into the garden, walking with short steps along the tall hedges of box and stopping in front of the flower-beds.

Just at that moment the Abbé Faujas happened to have his back turned to them. He was standing at the little door that opened into the alley, talking to Monsieur Maffre. When he heard their steps grating upon the gravel, the Trouches had got up close behind him and were underneath the arbor. He turned round, and checked him-

self in the middle of a sentence, quite astounded at seeing them there. Monsieur Maffre, who did not know them, was looking at them with curiosity.

"A beautiful day, isn't it, gentlemen?" said Olympe, who had turned pale beneath her brother's gaze.

The Abbé abruptly dragged the magistrate into the alley, where he quickly freed himself from him.

"He is furious!" murmured Olympe. "Well, we had better stay where we are now. If we go back upstairs, he will think we are afraid of him. I've had quite enough of this kind of going-on, and you will see what I will say to him."

She made Trouche sit down on one of the chairs which Rose had brought out a short time previously. When the Abbé returned he found them tranquilly settled there. He pushed the bolts of the little door into their sockets, glanced quickly round to assure himself that the trees screened them from observation, and then he came close up to the Trouches, exclaiming in suppressed tones:

"You forget our agreement. You undertook to remain in your own rooms."

"It was too hot up there," Olympe replied. "We are not committing any crime by coming down here to get a little fresh air."

The priest was going to break out angrily, when his sister, who was still quite pale from the effort she had made in resisting him, added in a peculiar tone:

"Don't make a noise, now! There are some people over there, and you might do yourself harm."

Both the Trouches laughed slightly. The Abbé fixed his eyes upon them with a terrible expression, but without speaking.

"Sit down," said Olympe. "You want an explanation, don't you? Well, you shall have one. We are tired of

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imprisoning ourselves. You are living here in clover; the house seems to belong to you, and so does the garden. So much the better indeed; and we are delighted to see how well things appear to be going with you, but you mustn't treat us as dirt beneath your feet. You have never thought of bringing me up a single bunch of grapes; you have given us the most miserable room, you hide us away and are ashamed of us; and you shut us up as though we had the plague. You must understand that this can't go on any longer!"

"I am not the master here," replied the Abbé Faujas, "You must address yourselves to Monsieur Mouret if you want to strip his garden."

"We don't want to pry into your affairs," Olympe continued. "We know what we know, and that is sufficient for us. But all this proves what a bad heart you have. Do you think if we were in your position we shouldn't invite you to come and take your share in the good things that were going?"

"What is it that you want me to do?" demanded the Abbé. "Do you suppose that I am rolling in wealth? You know what sort of a room I occupy myself; it is more scantily furnished than your own. The house isn't mine and I can't bestow it upon you."

Olympe shrugged her shoulders. She silenced her husband who was beginning to speak, and then she calmly continued:

"Everyone has his own ideas of life. If you had millions you wouldn't buy a strip of carpet for your bedside; you would spend them all on some foolish scheme. We, on the other hand, like to be comfortable. Dare you say that if you had a fancy for the handsomest furniture in the house and for the linen and food and anything else it contains you couldn't have them this very evening? Well, in such circumstances a good brother



would think of his relations, and wouldn't leave them in wretchedness and squalor as you leave us!"

The Abbé Faujas looked keenly at the Trouches. They were both swaying themselves backward and forward upon their chairs.

"You are a couple of ungrateful people," he said after a moment's silence. "I have already done a great deal for you. You have me to thank for the food that you have now. I still have letters of yours, Olympe, letters in which you beseech me to rescue you from want by bringing you over to Plassans. Now that you are here and your livelihood is assured, you break out into fresh demands."

"Stuff!" Trouche impudently interrupted. "You sent for us herè because you wanted us. I have learned to my cost not to believe in anyone's fine talk. I have allowed my wife to speak, but women can never come to the point. In two words, my good friend, you are making a mistake in keeping us cooped up like watch-dogs, who are only brought out in the hour of danger. We are getting weary of it, and we shall end by doing something rash, perhaps. Confound it all, give us a little liberty. Since the house isn't yours and you despise all luxury, what harm can it do you if we make ourselves comfortable? We shan't eat the walls!"

"It's only natural," exclaimed Olympe, "that we should rebel against being constantly locked up. We will take care not to do anything to prejudice you. Go your own way, and you may depend upon us; but let us go ours. Is that understood, eh?"

The Abbé Faujas had bent his head down; he remained silent for a moment, and then, raising his eyes, and avoiding a direct reply, he said:

"Hearken to what I say. If ever you do anything to

hamper me, I swear to you that I will send you away to starve in a cellar."

Then he went back into the house, leaving them under the arbor. From this time the Trouches went down into the garden almost every day, but they conducted themselves with considerable discretion, and they refrained from going there at the times when the priest was talking with the guests from the neighboring gardens.

The following week Olympe complained so much of the room she was occupying that Marthe kindly offered her Serge's, which was now unoccupied. The Trouches kept both rooms. They slept in the young man's old bedroom, from which not a single article of furniture had been removed, and they made the other room into a sort of drawing-room, for which Rose found them some old velvet-covered furniture in the lumber-room. Olympe in great delight ordered a rose-colored dressing-gown from the best maker in Plassans.

Mouret, who had forgotten that Marthe had asked his permission to let the Trouches have Serge's room, was quite surprised to find them there one evening. He had gone up to look for a knife which he thought his son must have left in one of the drawers, and, as he entered the room, he saw Trouche trimming with this very knife a switch which he had just cut from one of the pear-trees in the garden. Then he apologized and went down stairs again.

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#### XIV

During the public procession of the Feast of Corpus Christi, when Monseigneur Rousselot came down the steps of the magnificent altar in the Place of the Sub-prefecture which had been set up through the generosity

of Madame de Condamin, by the very door of the small house which she occupied, it was noticed with much surprise by the spectators that the bishop abruptly turned his back upon the Abbé Faujas.

"Ah! has there been some disagreement between them?" exclaimed Madame Rougon, who was looking out of her drawing-room window.

"Didn't you know about it?" asked Paloque, who was leaning by the old lady's side. "It has been the talk of the town since yesterday. The Abbé Fenil has been restored to favor."

Monsieur de Condamin, who was standing behind the ladies, began to laugh. He had made his escape from his own house, saying it smelt like a church.

"If you believe all the stories you hear!" he said. "The bishop is nothing but an old weather-cock, turning one way or the other according as Faujas or Fenil blows against him; to-day it is one of them, to-morrow it will be the other. They have quarreled and made it up again, half a score times at least. Before three days are over, you will see that it will be Faujas who will be the pet again."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Madame Paloque; "it is serious this time. It seems that the Abbé Faujas has caused his lordship great unpleasantness. His lordship has received reproachful letters from Rome, in which he is recommended to be on his guard. It is said that the Abbé Faujas is a political agent."

"Who says so?" asked Madame Rougon.

"I have heard it said, I really don't remember by whom," the judge's wife replied carelessly.

Monsieur de Condamin whispered in Madame Rougon's ear:

"I have already seen her twice going to the Abbé Fenil's. They have got some plot or other in hand, I am



sure. The Abbé Faujas must have trodden somehow or other upon this viper of a woman, and she is trying to bite him. If she were not so ugly I would do her the service of telling her that her husband will never be president."

"Why? I don't understand," the old lady murmured, with a guileless expression.

Monsieur de Condamin looked at her curiously, and then he began to smile.

The last two gendarmes in the procession had just disappeared round the corner of the Cours Sauvaire, and the few guests whom Madame Rougon had invited to come and witness the blessing of the altar returned into the drawing-room and chatted about the bishop's charming manner and the new banners of the different congregations, especially the one belonging to the young girls of the Home of the Virgin, which had attracted much attention. The ladies were loud in their praises, and the Abbé Faujas' name was mentioned every moment in the most eulogistic terms.

"He is clearly a saint!" Madame Paloque sniggered to Monsieur de Condamin, who had taken a seat near her.

Then, bending forward toward him, she added:

"I could not speak openly before Madame Rougon, you know, but there is a great deal of talk about the Abbé Faujas and Madame Mouret."

"Madame Mouret is a charming woman, and extremely winning notwithstanding her forty years," was all that Monsieur de Condamin said in reply.

"Oh, yes! she is very charming, very charming, indeed," Madame Paloque murmured, while her face turned quite green with envy.

"Extremely charming," persisted the conservator of rivers and forests. "She is at the age of genuine pas-

sions and great happiness. You ladies are given to judging each other unfavorably."

Then he left the drawing-room, chuckling over Madame Paloque's suppressed rage.

On the Tuesday after the public procession, the weather was lovely. The sound of laughter was heard in the gardens of the Rastoils and the Sub-Prefect, and in both of them there were numerous guests sitting under the trees. The Abbé Faujas was reading his breviary in the Mourets' garden after his usual custom, as he walked slowly backward and forward along the tall hedges of box. For some days past he had kept the little door that led to the alley bolted; he was coquetting with his neighbors and holding himself aloof that he might make them more anxious to see him. It was possible that he had noticed a slight coldness in their manner after his last misunderstanding with the bishop and the abominable reports that his enemies circulated against him.

About five o'clock, as the sun was sinking, the Abbé Surin proposed a game of shuttlecock to Monsieur Rastoil's daughters. He was very clever at it himself. Notwithstanding the approach of their thirtieth year, Angéline and Aurélie were immensely fond of games, and their mother would have made them still wear short frocks if she had dared. When the servant brought the battledoors, the Abbé Surin, who was looking about for a shady spot, for the garden was flooded with the last rays of the sun, was struck with an idea of which the young ladies cordially approved.

"Shall we go and play in the Chevillottes alley?" he said. "We shall be shaded by the chestnut-trees, and we shall have a longer stretch."

They went out of the garden and commenced a most delightful game. The two girls began. Angéline was

the first to fail to keep the shuttlecock up. The Abbé Surin, who took her place, handled his battledoor with quite a professional skill and ease. Every time that the Abbé Faujas raised his eyes from his breviary as he paced about the Mourets' garden, he saw the white feathers of the shuttlecock skimming above the wall like a huge butterfly.

"Are you there, your reverence?" cried Angéline, going and knocking at the little door. "Our shuttlecock has fallen into your garden."

The Abbé, picking up the shuttlecock which had dropped at his feet, made up his mind to open the door. "Oh, thank you! your reverence," said Aurélie, who had already taken the battledoor. "It is only Angéline who would ever make such a stroke. The other day when papa was watching us she sent it right against his ear, and with such a bang that he was quite deaf till the next day."

There was more laughter at this; and the Abbé Surin, who was as rosy as a girl, delicately wiped his brow with gentle touches of a handkerchief of fine texture.

The Abbé Faujas, holding his breviary under his arm and smiling paternally, stood on the threshold of the little door. Through the half-opened cart-entrance of the Sub-Prefecture he could see Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies sitting in front of the cascade surrounded by his friends. He looked straight in front of him, however, and counted the points of the game, complimenting the Abbé Surin and consoling the young ladies.

"I tell you what, Péqueur," Monsieur de Condamin whispered pleasantly into the sub-prefect's ear, "you make a mistake in not inviting this little Abbé to your parties. He is a great favorite with the ladies, and he looks as though he could waltz to perfection."

But Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who was talking



to Monsieur Delangre with much animation, did not appear to hear what Monsieur de Condamin said, and he went on with his conversation with the mayor.

"Really, my dear sir," he said, "I don't know where you see all the merits that you profess to find in him. On the contrary, indeed, the Abbé Faujas appears to me to be a very doubtful character. I really don't see why I should go down on my knees to this priest, especially as the clergy of Plassans are hostile to us. I should gain no advantage by doing so."

Monsieur Delangre and Monsieur de Condamin exchanged glances of intelligence.

"None, whatever," continued the sub-prefect. "It is no use your pretending to look mysterious; I may tell you that I have myself written to Paris. I was a good deal bothered and I wanted to be quite certain about this Faujas, whom you seem to consider as a sort of prince in disguise. Well! do you know what reply I got? They told me that they did not know him and could tell me nothing about him whatever, and that I must carefully avoid mixing myself up with clerical matters. They are grumpy enough up in Paris, as it is, since the election of that ass of a Lagrifoul, and I have got to be prudent, you understand."

The mayor exchanged another glance with the conservator of rivers and forests. He even slightly shrugged his shoulders before the scrupulously correct mustaches of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies.

"Just listen to me," he said to him after a moment's silence; "you would like to be prefect, wouldn't you?"

The sub-prefect smiled as he rocked himself in his chair.

"Well, then, go at once, and shake hands with the Abbé Faujas, who is waiting for you down there, while he is watching them play at shuttlecock."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies was silent with astonishment. He seemed quite puzzled. Then he turned toward Monsieur de Condamin, and asked with some show of uneasiness:

"Is that your advice also?"

"Certainly; go and offer him your hand," replied the conservator of rivers and forests.

Then, with a slight touch of irony, he added:

"Go and consult my wife, in whom I know you have perfect confidence."

Madame de Condamin had just come up to them. She was wearing a lovely rose and a pearl-gray dress. When they spoke to her of the Abbé, she said playfully to the sub-prefect:

"It is very wrong of you to neglect your religious duties; one never sees you at church except when there is some official ceremony. What sort of an opinion do you expect people will have of the government you represent, when they see you are not on the side of religion?—Leave us, gentlemen; I am going to confess Monsieur Péqueur."

She took a seat, smiling playfully.

"Octavie," said the sub-prefect, when they were left alone together, "don't make fun of me. You weren't a very pious person in the Rue du Helder in Paris. It's all I can do to keep from laughing when I see you worshiping in Saint-Saturnin's."

"You are too flippant, my friend," she replied, "and your flippancy will play you a bad turn one of these days. Seriously, you quite distress me. I gave you credit for having more intelligence. Are you so blind that you cannot see that you are tottering in your position? Let me tell you that it is only from fear of alarming the Legitimists in Plassans that you haven't been already overthrown. If they saw a new sub-prefect arriving

here, the Legitimists would take alarm, while, so long as you remain where you are, they will continue quietly asleep, feeling certain of victory at the next election. All this is not very flattering to you, I am quite aware, and the more so as I know for an absolute fact that the authorities are acting without taking you into their counsels. Listen to me, my friend, I tell you that you are ruined if you don't divine certain things."

He looked at her with unfeigned alarm.

"Has the 'great man' been writing to you?" he asked referring to a personage whom they thus designated between themselves.

"No; he has broken entirely with me. I am not a fool, and I saw, before he did so, the necessity of this separation. And I have nothing at all to complain of. He has shown me the greatest kindness. He found me a husband and gave me some excellent advice which has proved extremely useful to me. But I have retained some friends in Paris; and I swear to you that you have only just got time left to cling on to the branches if you don't want to fall. Don't be a pagan any longer, but go and offer your hand to the Abbé Faujas."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies drooped his eyes and seemed a little humiliated by the lesson he was getting. He was a great fop, and he showed his white teeth, as he tried to reassert himself by murmuring tenderly:

"Ah! if you had only been willing, Octavie, we might have governed Plassans between us. I asked you to resume that delightful life—"

"Really, you are a great idiot!" she interrupted in tones of vexation. "You annoy me with your 'Octavie.' I am Madame de Condamin to everyone, my friend. Can you understand nothing? I have an income of thirty thousand francs; I am queen of a whole Sub-Prefecture; I go everywhere; I am respected everywhere, bowed to



and liked. What in the world should I want with you? You would only pull me down. I am a respectable woman, my friend."

She rose from her seat and walked toward Doctor Porquier, who, according to his usual custom, had come to spend an hour in the garden for a chat with his fair patients, after a round of visits.

"Oh, doctor!" she exclaimed with one of her pretty grimaces, "I have got a headache. It pains me just here, under the left eyebrow."

"That is the side of the heart, madame," said the doctor gallantly.

Madame de Condamin smiled and did not push the consultation any further. Madame Paloque bent toward her husband, whom she brought with her every time she came that she might constantly recommend him to the sub-prefect's influence, and whispered in his ear:

"That's the only way he has of curing them."

When Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies had rejoined Monsieur de Condamin and Monsieur Delangre he maneuvered cleverly to draw them toward the cart-entrance. When he had got within a few yards of it, he stopped and appeared to be interested in the game of shuttlecock which was still going on in the alley. The Abbé Surin, saw that they were being watched, and he quite surpassed himself in his play. Mademoiselle Aurélie was also playing very well, spurred on by having such a master of the game for a partner.

"Excellent! excellent!" cried the charmed sub-prefect.

"Ah! your reverence, I must compliment you upon your skill."

Then, turning toward Madame de Condamin, Doctor Porquer and the Palokes, he exclaimed:

"I've really never seen anything like it before. Your

reverence does not object to our admiring your play, I hope?"

All the visitors to the Sub-Prefecture now formed themselves into a group at the end of the blind-alley. The Abbé Faujas had not moved from the position he had taken up, and he acknowledged by a slight nod the salutations of Monsieur Delangre and Monsieur de Condamin. He was still counting the game. When Aurélie missed the shuttlecock, he said with a smile:

"That makes you three hundred and ten since the distance was altered; your sister is only forty-seven."

While he appeared to follow the flight of the shuttlecock with an absorbing interest he continued every now and then to glance at the door of the Rastoils' garden which still remained wide open. Monsieur Maffre was as yet the only person who had shown himself there. A voice called to him from inside the garden.

"What is it that is amusing them so much out there?" Monsieur Rastoil, who was talking to Monsieur de Bourdeu by the rustic table, asked him.

"His lordship's secretary is playing at shuttlecock," Monsieur Maffre replied. "He is making some wonderful strokes and they are all watching him. His reverence the vicar is there, and seems quite delighted."

Monsieur de Bourdeu took a big pinch of snuff as he exclaimed:

"Ah! his reverence the Abbé Faujas is there, is he?"

He glanced at Monsieur Rastoil and they both seemed ill at ease.

"I have heard," the president hazarded, "that the Abbé has been restored to his lordship's favor."

"Yes, indeed; this very morning," said Monsieur Maffre. "There has been a complete reconciliation, and I have heard the most touching details. His lordship

shed tears. Ah, there can be no doubt that the Abbé Fenil has been mistaken."

"I thought that you were the vicar-general's friend," observed Monsieur de Bourdeu.

"So I am, but I am also his reverence the vicar's friend," the magistrate replied with animation. "Thank goodness! he is a man of sufficient piety to be able to despise all the calumnies that may be uttered against him. They haven't even stuck at attacking his morality! It is disgraceful!"

The former prefect again glanced at the president with a singular expression.

"And they've tried to compromise him in political matters," Monsieur Maffre continued. "They said that he had come here to overturn everything, to bestow places right and left and to bring about the triumph of the Paris clique!"

Monsieur de Bourdeu was drawing a face on the gravel of the walk with the end of his stick.

"Yes," he said carelessly, "I have heard these things mentioned. It is very unlikely that a minister of religion would allow himself to play such a part; and, to the honor of Plassans, I think it may be said that he would fail completely. There is no one who could be bought."

Oh! it's all stuff and nonsense, that!" cried the president, shrugging his shoulders. A town can't be turned inside out like an old coat. Paris may send us as many spies and agents as she likes, but Plassans will always keep Legitimist. Look at that little Péqueur now! We've only made a single mouthful of him! Folks must be very stupid to believe in mysterious personages running about the provinces hawking places and appointments. I should be very curious to see one of these gentlemen."

He seemed to be getting a little angry, and Monsieur



Maffre with some show of uneasiness, appeared to think it necessary to defend himself.

"Pardon me," he exclaimed. "I have never asserted that his reverence, the Abbé Faujas, was a Bonapartist agent; on the contrary, I have always considered the accusation a most absurd one."

"Ah! it's not a question of the Abbé Faujas. My remarks are quite general. The Abbé Faujas is quite above all suspicion.

Then there was an interval of silence. Monsieur de Bourdeu finished the face he was drawing on the gravel by adding a long pointed beard to it.

"The Abbé Faujas has no political views," at last he said in his dry voice.

"Evidently," Monsieur Rastoil replied; "we have found fault with him for his indifference, but now I approve of it. With all this gossip in the air, it would have had a prejudicial effect upon religion. You know as well as I do, Bourdeu, that he can't be accused of the slightest suspicious step. He has never been seen at the Sub-Prefecture, has he? If he were a Bonapartist, he would not be likely to conceal the fact, would he?"

"Certainly not."

The merriment in the alley was now louder than ever. Monsieur Rastoil, who had checked himself for a moment, now continued with a smile:

"Just listen to them! It makes one quite long to be young again!"

Then, in more serious tones, he added:

"Yes, my wife and my son have made me feel a strong liking for the Abbé Faujas; and we are very sorry that his discreet reserve keeps him from joining our circle."

As Monsieur Bourdeu nodded his head approvingly, shouts of applause were heard in the alley. There was a perfect uproar of clapping of hands and ringing laugh-

ter and shouts, as though some troop of school-boys had just rushed out to play; Monsieur Rastoil got up from his rustic chair.

"Good gracious!" he said with a smile; "let us go and see what they are doing. My legs are beginning to feel a little cramped."

The other two followed him, and they all three went and stood by the little door. It was the first time that the president and the ex-prefect had ventured so far. When they saw the group formed by the guests of the sub-prefect at the end of the alley, their faces assumed a serious expression. Monsieur Pequeur des Saulaies drew himself up and put on an official attitude. Madame de Condamin was flitting up and down the alley with constant laughs and smiles and filling it with the rustle of her rose-colored dress. The two sets of guests kept glancing at each other, neither party being willing to retire, while the Abbé Faujas still maintained his position between them at the Mourets' door, and was quietly enjoying himself without seeming to be in the least degree conscious of the delicacy of the situation.

All the spectators were holding their breath, for the Abbé Surin, seeing that their number had increased, was desirous of extorting their applause by a last exhibition of skill. He brought all his science into play, made difficulties for himself on purpose to overcome them, turned himself round and struck at the shuttlecock without looking where it was coming, but seeming able to divine its position, and sending it back to Mademoiselle Aurélie over his head with a mathematical precision. He accelerated the rapidity of his play, and at last, as he was jumping aside, his foot slipped and he nearly fell upon the bosom of Madame de Condamin, who had stretched out her arms with a little cry. The spectators thinking he was hurt, rushed up, but the Abbé, pressing

the ground with his hands and knees, suddenly sprang up again by a strong effort and sent the shuttlecock, which had not yet fallen, spinning back to Mademoiselle Aurélie and then he gave his battledoor a triumphant flourish.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, stepping up to him.

"Bravo! it was a magnificent stroke!" exclaimed Monsieur Rastoil, who also came up.

The game was interrupted, for the two sets of guests had invaded the alley, and they were mixing with each other, and crowding round the Abbé Surin, who was leaning, quite out of breath, against the wall by the Abbé Faujas' side. Everybody was talking at once.

"I was afraid that he had hurt himself badly," Doctor Porquier said to Monsieur Maffre, in a voice that was full of emotion.

Madame de Condamin went from the sub-prefect to the president and brought them together, and then exclaimed:

"Really, I am worse for it than he is! I thought that we were going to fall together. There is a great stone there; did you notice it?"

"Yes, I see it there," said Monsieur Rastoil; "it must have caught against his heel."

"Was it this round stone, do you think?" asked Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, picking up a pebble.

They had never spoken to each other before, except on the occasions of official ceremonies. They both began to examine the stone, and they passed it from one to the other, remarking that it was very sharp, and must have cut the Abbé's shoe. Madame de Condamin stood smiling between them, and assured them that she was beginning to feel better.



"His reverence the Abbé is feeling ill!" cried Monsieur Rastoil's daughters.

The Abbé Surin had, indeed, turned very pale at hearing of the danger he had run. He was reeling with faintness, when the Abbé Faujas who had held himself aloof, took him in his powerful arms, and carried him off into the Mourets' garden, where he seated him upon a chair. The two sets of guests swarmed under the arbor, where the young Abbé now completely fainted away.

"Get some water and some vinegar, Rose!" cried the Abbé Faujas, running up toward the steps.

Mouret, who was in the dining-room, came to the window, but, seeing all these people in the garden, he recoiled as though he were struck with fear, and he kept himself out of sight. Rose came up with a whole collection of drugs, muttering as she hastened along:

"If only madame were here! But she has gone to the Seminary to see the little one. I am all alone, and I can't do impossibilities, can I? The master would let you die, before he would get you even a glass of water."

By the time she had got through this grumble, she had reached the Abbé Surin who was lying in a swoon. "Oh! the cherub!" she exclaimed, overcome with her womanly pity.

The Abbé Surin, with his closed eyes and his pale brow wreathed with his long, fair hair, looked like one of the sweet-faced martyrs that one sees breathing out his life in some sacred picture. The elder of the Rastoil girls was supporting his head, which was lying languidly back, allowing his delicate, white neck to be seen. They were all in great excitement round him. Madame de Comdamin gently dabbed his brow with a rag soaked in vinegar and water, and the two sets of guests stood anxiously by her. At last the young Abbé opened his eyes,

but he closed them again immediately. He had two more swoons before he recovered.

"You have given me a terrible fright!" Doctor Porquier, who had kept his hand fast in his own, said to him at last.

The Abbé, still sitting in the chair, stammered out confused thanks, and assured them all that it was a mere nothing. Then he saw that his cassock had been unbuttoned, and that his neck was bare; and he smiled as he buttoned it and readjusted his bands. To prove that he was all right again, when the company advised him to keep very quiet, he set off back to the alley with the Rastoil girls to finish the game.

"You have a very nice place here," said Monsieur Rastoil to the Abbé Faujas, with whom he had kept all this time.

"There is a delightful air on this slope," added Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, in his charming manner.

The two sets of guests were looking with curiosity at the Mourets' house.

"Perhaps the ladies and gentlemen," exclaimed Rose, "would like to stay in the garden a little time; I will go and get some chairs."

She made three journeys in quest of them in spite of the protestations of the company. Then, after having glanced at each other for a moment, the two sets of guests felt constrained by courtesy to seat themselves. The sub-prefect sat on the Abbé Faujas' right, while the president took a chair at his left, and a friendly conversation was at once commenced.

"You are a very quiet neighbor, your reverence," said Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies very graciously; "you can't imagine the pleasure it gives me to see you every day at the same hour in this little paradise. It seems

to give me a feeling of restfulness after all the noise and worry I have."

"A pleasant neighbor is a very rare thing," observed Monsieur Rastoil.

"Indeed he is," said Monsieur de Bourdeu. "His reverence seems to have filled this spot with all the peaceful tranquillity of a cloister."

While the Abbé was smiling and acknowledging these complimentary remarks, Monsieur de Condamin, who had not yet seated himself, stooped down and whispered in Monsieur Delangre's ear:

"There's Rastoil there, hoping to get that lout of a son of his made assistant prosecutor!"

Madame de Condamin had just caused a great sensation by saying, in a meaning way:

"What I like about this garden is a sort of tender charm it seems to possess, which gives it a feeling of being cut off from all the cares and wretchedness of the world. It is a spot where Cain and Abel might reconcile themselves to each other."

She gave a strong accentuation to this last sentence, which she accompanied by two glances, one to the right and the other to the left, toward the neighboring gardens. Monsieur Maffre and Doctor Porquier nodded their heads approvingly; while the Paloques looked inquisitively at each other, feeling uneasy and not knowing what to do, and fearing to compromise themselves with one side or the other if they opened their mouths.

At the end of a quarter of an hour Monsieur Rastoil rose from his seat.

"My wife will be wondering where we have gone to," he said.

All the company rose, feeling somewhat embarrassed as to the manner of their leave-taking. The Abbé Fau-



jas spread out his hands and said, with the pleasantest possible smile:

"My paradise is always open to you."

Then the president promised to come and see the vicar every now and then, and the sub-prefect, with more effusiveness, said he would do the same. The two sets of guests lingered for another five minutes exchanging compliments, while, out in the alley, the laughter of the Rastoil girls and the Abbé Surin was heard again. The game was going on with all its previous fervor, and the shuttlecock could be seen over the wall passing backward and forward in its regular flight.

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## XV

One Friday, as Madame Paloque was entering Saint-Saturnin's, she was greatly surprised to see Marthe kneeling in front of Saint Michael's chapel. The Abbé Faujas was hearing confessions.

"Ah!" she said to herself, "has she succeeded in touching the Abbé's heart? I must wait here a little and watch. It would be very fine if Madame de Condamin were to come."

She took a chair, a little behind, and half kneeling down she covered her face with her hands as though she were absorbed in earnest prayer, but she spread her fingers apart and glanced through them. The church was very gloomy. Marthe, with her head bent down on her prayer-book, looked as though she were asleep, and her figure stood out blackly against a white pillar. It was only her shoulders, heaving up and down with her deep-drawn sighs, that seemed to be alive. She was so profoundly overcome with emotion, that she was leaving her

turn to be taken by some other of the Abbé Faujas' penitents. The Abbé waited on for a few moments, and then, seeming to grow a little impatient, he began to tap gently on the wood of the confessional-box. Then one of the women who were there, seeing that Marthe showed no sign of moving, decided to take her place. The chapel was growing empty, and Marthe still remained motionless and shaken with sighs.

"She seems in a tremendous state," Madame Paloque said to herself. "It is really quite indecent to make such an exhibition of oneself in church. Ah! here comes Madame de Condamin!"

Madame de Condamin was just entering the church. She stopped for a moment before the holy-water basin, removed her glove, and crossed herself with a pretty gesture. Her silk dress made a murmuring sound as she passed along through the narrow space between the chairs. As she knelt down, she filled the lofty vault with the rustling of her skirts. She wore her usual affable expression, and her face smiled through the gloom of the church. Soon she and Marthe were the only two left. The priest seemed to be getting vexed, and he tapped more loudly upon the confessional-box.

"It is your turn, madame; I am the last," Madame de Condamin whispered politely, bending toward Marthe, whom she had not recognized.

Marthe raised her face, a face that was pinched and pale from her extreme emotion, and did not appear to understand. She seemed as though she were awakening from some ecstatic trance, and her eyelids trembled and blinked.

"Come, ladies, come!" exclaimed the Abbé, who had half-opened the door of the confessional-box.

Madame de Condamin rose smilingly to obey the priest's summons; but Marthe, recognizing her, hastened

hurriedly into the chapel, and then she again fell upon her knees some three yards away from the confessional-box.

Madame Paloque was feeling much amused. She was hoping that the two ladies would seize each other by the hair. Marthe could hear all that was said, for Madame de Condamin had a clear, flute-like voice, and she dallied lengthily over her sins, and she quite animated the confessional with her pretty gossiping manner. Once she even laughed a little muffled laugh, at the sound of which Marthe raised her pain-racked face. Soon afterwards she finished her confession, and began to retire, but she quickly returned again, and commenced talking once more, but without kneeling down, and merely bending her head.

"That she-devil is making sport of Madame Mouret and the Abbé," the judge's wife thought to herself. "It's all put on, this is."

At last Madame de Condamin retired. Marthe followed her with her eyes, and seemed to be waiting till she had disappeared. Then she went and leaned against the confessional-box, and let her knees fall heavily down. Madame Paloque had slipped a little nearer and craned out her head, but she could see nothing but the penitent's dark dress that was spread out around her. For nearly half an hour there was not the slightest movement. Now and then she thought she could detect the sound of smothered sobs in the throbbing silence, which was broken at times by a dry creak from the confessional-box. She was beginning to feel a little weary of her watching; there was nothing to be done now except to stare at Marthe as she left the chapel.

The Abbé Faujas was the first to leave, closing the door of the confessional-box with an appearance of annoyance. Madame Mouret lingered on for a long time,



bent down and motionless. When at last she went away, her face covered with her veil, she seemed quite broken down, and she forgot to cross herself.

"There has been a row; the Abbé hasn't made himself pleasant," Madame Paloque said to herself. She followed Marthe as far as the Place de l'Archeveché, where she stopped and seemed to hesitate for a moment; then, having glanced cautiously around to be sure that no one was watching her, she stealthily slipped into the house where the Abbé Fenil lived, at one of the corners of the Place.

Marthe now almost lived at Saint-Saturnin's. She carried out her religious duties with great fervor. Even the Abbé Faujas had often to remonstrate with her about her excessive zeal. He allowed her to communicate only once a month, fixed the times when she should devote herself to pious exercises, and insisted upon her not entirely shutting herself up in religious practices. She had for a long time been requesting him to let her be present every morning at a low mass before he would accede to her desires. One day when she told him that she had lain for a whole hour on the cold floor of her room to punish herself for some fault she had committed, he was very angry with her, and told her that it was her confessor alone who had the right to inflict penance. He treated her very sternly, and threatened to send her back to the Abbé Bourrette if she did not absolutely follow his directions.

"I was wrong to take you at all," he often said; "I do not like disobedient souls."

"Be kind to me," she murmured to the Abbé Faujas, "be kind to me, for I stand in great need of kindness."

And when he did show her kindness, she could have gone down upon her knees and thanked him. At these times he unbent and spoke to her in a father-like

way, and pointed out to her that her imagination was too excited and feverish. God, he told her, did not like to be worshiped in that way, in wild impulses. She smiled, looking quite pretty and young again with her blushing face. She promised to be more comfortable in the future. Sometimes she underwent paroxysms of devotion, which crushed her down upon the flag-stones in some dark corner, where she no longer knelt, but almost groveled upon the ground, stammering out burning words, and when even her power of speech died away and she continued her prayers by an impulse of her whole being, in an appeal to that divine kiss which seemed ever hovering about her brow without pressing it.

At home Marthe was becoming querulous. Up till now she had been quite indifferent and listless, quite happy so long as her husband left her at peace; but now that he had begun to spend his whole days in the house, having lost his old spirit of teasing banter, and having grown mopish and melancholy, she grew impatient with him.

"He is always hanging about us," she said to the cook, one day.

"Oh, he does it out of pure maliciousness," Rose replied. "He isn't a good man at heart. I haven't found that out to-day for the first time. He's only putting on this woe-begone look, he who is so fond of hearing his tongue wag, to try and make us pity him. He's really bursting with anger, but he won't show it, because he thinks that if he looks miserable we shall be sorry for him and do just what he wants."

Mouret had a hold upon the women in his purse. He did not care to wrangle and argue with them for fear of making his life still less comfortable than it already was; but, though he no longer grumbled and meddled

and interfered, he showed his displeasure by refusing a single extra hundred-sou piece to either Marthe or Rose. He gave the latter a hundred francs a month for the purchase of provisions; wine, oil, and preserves were in the house. The cook was obliged to get on with that sum to the end of the month, even if she had to pay something out of her own pocket. As for Marthe, she had absolutely nothing; her husband never gave her even a single sou, and she was compelled to appeal to Rose, and to get her to try to save ten francs out of the monthly allowance. Often she found herself without a pair of boots to put on, and she was obliged to borrow from her mother the money to buy a dress or a bonnet.

"But Mouret must surely be going mad!" Madame Rougon cried. "You can't go naked! I will speak to him about it."

"I beg you not to do anything of the kind, mother," Marthe said. "He detests you, and he would treat me even worse than he does already if he knew that I talked of these matters to you."

She began to cry as she added:

"I have shielded him for a long time, but I really can't keep silent any longer. You remember that once he was most unwilling for me even to set my foot in the street; he kept me shut up, and treated me like a mere chattel. Now he is treating me so unkindly because he sees that I won't submit any longer to be nothing but a servant."

"He doesn't strike you, does he?"

"No; but it will come to that. At present, he contents himself with refusing me everything. I haven't a single centime about me. The other day I had to borrow two sous from Rose to buy some thread to sew up my gloves, which were splitting all over."

It was a source of especial distress to Marthe that she was not able to contribute to the offertories at Saint-



Saturnin's. She used to conceal ten-sou pieces in scraps of paper and keep them carefully for the high mass on Sundays. She would have robbed her husband if she could have found the key of his desk, so keenly was she tortured by being unable to do anything for the honor of this church which she so passionately loved. She felt all the jealousy of a deceived woman, when the Abbé Faujas used a chalice which had been presented by Madame de Condamin; while on the days when he said mass in front of the altar-frontal which she herself had embroidered, she was filled with a fervent joy, and said her prayers with ecstatic thrills, as though some part of herself lay beneath the priest's extended hands. She would have liked to have a whole chapel of her own; and she had dreams of expending a fortune upon one, and of shutting herself up in it and receiving the Deity all to herself at her own altar.

Rose, who received all her confidences, had recourse to all sorts of plans to obtain money for her. This year she secretly gathered the finest fruit in the garden and sold it, and she disposed of a lot of old furniture that was stowed away in an attic, and managed her sales so well that she succeeded in getting together a sum of three hundred francs, which she handed over to Marthe with great triumph. The latter kissed the old cook.

"Oh! how good you are!" she said to her, affectionately. "Are you quite sure that he knows nothing about what you have done? I saw the other day, in the Rue des Orfèvres, two little cruets of chased silver, such dear little things; they are marked two hundred francs. Now, you'll do me a little favor, won't you? I don't want to go and buy them myself, because some one would be sure to see me going into the shop. Tell your sister to go and get them. She can bring them here after

dark, and can give them to you through the kitchen window."

This purchase of the cruets seemed like a clandestine intrigue to Marthe, and she felt thrills of the sweetest pleasure from it. For three days she kept the cruets at the bottom of a chest, hidden away behind layers of linen; and when she gave them to the Abbé Faujas in the sacristy of Saint-Saturnin's, she trembled and could scarcely speak. The Abbé scolded her in a kindly fashion. He was not fond of presents, and he spoke of money with the disdain of a strong-minded man who cares only for power and authority. During their two first years of poverty, even at times when he and his mother had had no food beyond bread and water, he had never thought of borrowing a ten-franc piece from the Mourets.

Marthe found a safe hiding-place for the hundred francs that she still had left. She, too, was becoming a little miserly; and she schemed how she should lay this money out, making some fresh plan every morning. While she was still in a state of doubt and hesitation, Rose told her that Madame Trouche wanted to see her privately. Olympe, who used to spend hours in the kitchen, had become Rose's intimate friend, and she often borrowed forty sous of her, to save herself from going upstairs at times when she said she had forgotten to bring her purse with her.

"Go upstairs and see her there," said the cook; "you will be better able to talk there. They are a good sort of people, and they are very fond of his reverence. They have had a lot of trouble. Madame Olympe has quite made my heart ache with all the things she has told me."

When Marthe went upstairs, she found Olympe in tears. They were too soft-hearted, she said, and their kindness was always being abused; then she entered up-

on an explanation of their history at Besancon, where the rascality of a partner had saddled them with a heavy load of debt. Now, to make matters worse their creditors were getting very impatient, and she had just received an insulting letter in which the sender threatened to write to the mayor and the bishop of Plassans.

"I don't mind what happens to me," she sobbed, "but I would give my head to save my brother from being compromised. He has already done too much for us, and I don't want to speak to him on the matter, for he is not rich, and he would only distress himself to no purpose. Good heavens! what can I do to keep that man from writing? My brother would die of shame if such a letter were sent to the mayor and the bishop. Yes, I know him well; he would die of shame!"

The tears rushed to Marthe's eyes. She was quite pale and she pressed Olympe's hands. Then, without the latter having preferred any request, she offered her her hundred francs.

"It is very little, I know; but perhaps it might be sufficient to avert the danger," she said with an expression of great anxiety.

"A hundred francs, a hundred francs!" exclaimed Olympe; "Oh, no! he would never be satisfied with a hundred francs."

Marthe lost all hope. She swore that she had not a centime more. She so far forgot herself as to speak of the cruets. If she had not bought them she would have been able to give three hundred francs. Madame Trouche's eyes sparkled.

"Three hundred francs, that is just what he demands," she said. "Ah! you would have rendered a much greater service to my brother by not giving him this present, which, besides, will have to remain in the church. Look at all the beautiful things the ladies at Besancon



presented to him! And he is not a bit the better for them to-day! Don't give him anything more; it is really nothing but robbery! Consult me about what to do; there is so much hidden misery—No! a hundred francs will certainly not be sufficient!"

At the end of half an hour, however, spent in lamentation, she accepted the hundred francs when she saw that Marthe had really nothing more.

"I will send them off to pacify the man for a little," she said, "but he won't leave us at peace long. But whatever you do, I beg of you not to mention anything about it to my brother. It would nearly kill him. And I think it would be better, too, if my husband knew nothing of what has passed between us; he is so proud that he would be sure to be doing something rash to be able to acquit himself of our obligation to you. We women can understand each other, you know."

This loan was a source of much pleasure to Marthe, and henceforth she had a fresh care, to ward off from the Abbé Faujas the danger that was threatening him without his being aware of it. She frequently went upstairs to the Trouches' rooms and stayed there for hours, discussing with Olympe the best means of discharging the debts. The latter had told her that many of the promises to pay had been indorsed by the priest, and that there would be a terrible scandal if they should ever be sent to any bailiff in Plassans to be enforced. The sum total of their liabilities was so great, she said, that for a long time she refused to disclose it, only weeping the more bitterly when Marthe pressed her. One day, however, she mentioned the sum of twenty thousand francs. Marthe was quite petrified upon hearing this. She would never be able to procure anything like twenty thousand francs, and she thought that she would certainly

have to wait for Mouret's death before she could hope to have any such sum at her disposition.

"I say twenty thousand francs in all," Olympe added hastily, disquieted by Marthe's grave appearance; "but we should be quite satisfied to be able to pay by small installments spread over half a score years. The creditors would wait for any length of time, if they were only quite sure of getting their installments regularly. It is a great pity that we can't find anyone who has sufficient confidence in us to make the small necessary advance."

This matter became an habitual topic of conversation. Olympe also frequently spoke of the Abbé Faujas, whom she appeared almost to worship. She told Marthe all kinds of private little details about the priest: such as, for instance, that he could not bear anything that tickled him, and that he could not go to sleep on his left side, and that he had a strawberry-mark on his right shoulder, which turned red in May like the natural fruit. Marthe smiled and never tired of hearing about these little matters; and she questioned the young woman about her childhood and that of her brother. When the subject of the money cropped up she seemed quite painfully overcome by her inability to do anything, and she even permitted herself to complain bitterly of Mouret, to whom Olympe, emboldened by Marthe's words, now always referred in her presence as the "old miser." Sometimes when Trouche returned from his office he found the two women still talking together, but at his appearance they checked themselves and changed the subject. Trouche conducted himself in the most satisfactory way, and the lady patronesses of the Home of the Virgin were highly pleased with him. He was never seen in any of the cafés in the town.

In order to be able to render some assistance to

Olympe, who sometimes talked about throwing herself out of the window, Marthe made Rose take all the useless old odds and ends that were lying about the house to a second-hand dealer in the market. At first the two women were a little timid about the matter, and they only disposed of broken-down chairs and tables when Mouret was out of the way, but afterward they began to lay hands upon more important articles, and they sold pieces of china and ornaments, and anything else that they could remove without its absence appearing too conspicuous. They were slipping down a fatal incline, and they would have ended by carting off all the furniture in the house and leaving nothing but the bare walls if Mouret had not one day charged Rose with thieving and threatened to send for the police.

"What, sir! A thief! I!" she cried. "Just because you happened to see me selling one of madame's rings. Be careful of what you are saying! The ring was mine; madame gave it to me. Madame isn't such a mean wretch as you are. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for leaving your wife without a sou! She hasn't even a pair of shoes to put on! The other day I had to pay the milkman myself! Yes, I did sell the ring, and what of that? Isn't madame's ring her own? She is obliged to turn it into money, since you won't give her any. If I were she, I would sell the whole house! The whole house, do you hear?"

Mouret now began to keep a close watch at all times. He locked up the cupboards and drawers and kept the keys in his own possession. When Rose went out he made a practice of looking at her hands with a mistrustful glance, and he felt at her pockets if he saw any suspicious swelling beneath her skirt. He brought back certain articles from the second-hand dealer and restored them to their places, dusting and wiping them ostentatiously in Marthe's pres-



ence to remind her of what he called Rose's thefts. He never directly accused his wife. There was a cut-glass bottle which he made a special source of torture to her. Rose had sold it for twenty sous, and had pretended to Mouret that it was broken. Now he made her bring it and put it on the table at every meal. One morning, at breakfast, she quite lost her temper over it, and she let it fall.

"There, sir, it's really broken this time, isn't it?" she cried, laughing in his face.

As he threatened to dismiss her, she exclaimed:

"You had better! I've been in your service for five and twenty years. If I went, madame would go with me!"

Marthe, reduced to extremities and pressed on by Rosè and Olympe, at last rebelled. She was desperately in want of five hundred francs. For the last week Olympe had been crying and sobbing, asserting that if she could not get five hundred francs by the end of the month one of the bills which had been indorsed by the Abbé Faujas would be published in one of the Plassans newspapers. The threatened publication of this bill, this terrible menace which she did not quite understand, threw Marthe into a state of dreadful alarm and she resolved to dare everything. In the evening, as they were going to bed, she asked Mouret for the five hundred francs, and then as he looked at her in amazement, she began to speak of the fifteen years which she had spent behind a counter at Marseilles, with a pen behind her ear like a clerk.

"We made the money together," she said; "and it belongs to us both. I want five hundred francs."

Mouret broke out violently from his long maintained moody silence, and all his old jeering passion showed itself again.

"Five hundred francs!" he cried. "Is it for your priest that you want them? I have been behaving like a simpleton and have kept my peace for fear I might say too much; but you must not imagine that you can go on forever making a fool of me! Five hundred francs! Why not say the whole house? The whole house certainly seems to belong to him! He wants some money does he? And he has told you to ask me for it? I might be amongst a lot of robbers in a wood instead of being in my own house! Everything I have is disappearing and I sha'n't have anything left very soon! No, not a single sou will I give you, not a single sou!"

"I want five hundred francs; half of the money belongs to me," Marthe replied tranquilly.

For a whole hour Mouret stormed and fumed and cried out the same string of reproaches. His wife was no longer the same, he said. Before the priest came, she loved him and obeyed him and looked after the house. Those who set her to act in opposition to him must be very wicked persons. Then his voice grew thick, and he let himself fall into a chair, broken down and as weak as a child.

"Give me the key of your desk!" said Marthe.

He got up from his chair and gathered up his strength for a last cry of protest.

"You want to strip me of everything! to leave your children with nothing but a bundle of straw for a bed, and you won't leave us even a loaf of bread! Well! well! clear every thing out, and send for Rose to fill her apron! There's the key!"

He threw the key to Marthe and she placed it beneath her pillow. She was quite pale after this quarrel, the first violent quarrel which she had ever had with her husband. She got into bed, but Mouret passed the night in an easy-chair. Toward morning Marthe heard him

sobbing. She would have given him back the key, if he had not wildly rushed down into the garden, though it was still pitch dark.

Peace again seemed to be re-established between them. The key of the desk remained hanging upon a nail near the mirror. Marthe, who was quite unaccustomed to the sight of large sums, felt a sort of fear of the money. She was very bashful and shame-faced at first whenever she went to open the drawer in which Mouret always kept some ten thousand francs in cash to pay for his purchases of wine. She strictly confined herself to taking only what was necessary. Olympe, too, gave her the most excellent advice, and told her that now she had the key she ought to be careful and economical; and seeing the trembling nervousness which she exhibited at the sight of the hoard of money, she ceased for some time to speak to her of the debts at Besancon.

Mouret relapsed again into his former moody silence.

Serge's admission to the Seminary had been another severe blow to him. His friends of the Cours Sauvaire, the retired traders who took their promenade there regularly between four o'clock and six, began to feel very uneasy about him, as they saw him coming along with his arms swaying about and his face wearing a stupefied expression, hardly making any reply to their remarks and seeming a prey to some incurable disease.

"He's breaking up; he's breaking up," they murmured to each other; "and he's only forty-four; it's scarcely credible. He will end by having softening of the brain."

Then these worthy gentlemen regaled themselves with certain scandalous stories which they whispered into each other's ears, passing them on in this way from one end of the bench to the other.

"Well," said a master-tanner in a half whisper, "there



isn't much pluck about Mouret; if I were in his place I would soon show the priest the door."

Then they all echoed that Mouret was certainly a very timid fellow, he who had formerly jeered so at husbands who allowed their wives to lead them by the nose.

These stories, however, in spite of the persistence with which certain persons kept them afloat, never got beyond a particular set of idle, gossiping people, and the reason which the Abbé himself gave for not taking up his residence in the official vicarage, namely, his liking for the Mourets' beautiful garden where he could read his breviary in such perfect peace, was generally accepted as the true one. His great piety, his ascetic life and his contempt for all the frivolities and coquetties which other priests allowed themselves placed him beyond all suspicion. The members of the Young Men's Club accused the Abbé Fenil of trying to ruin him. All the new part of the town was on his side, and it was only the Saint Mark quarter that was against him, its aristocratic inhabitants treating him with great reserve when they met him in Monseigneur Rousselot's saloons. However, in spite of all his popularity, he shook his head when old Madame Rougon told him that he might now dare all.

"Nothing is quite safe and solid yet," he said. "I am not sure of anyone. The least touch might bring the whole edifice toppling down."

Marthe had been causing him anxiety for some time past. He recognized that he was incapable of calming the fever of devotion which was raging within her. She escaped from his control and disobeyed him, and advanced further than he wished her to do. He was afraid lest this woman, who was so useful, this much respected patroness, might yet bring about his ruin. There was a fire burning within her which seemed to break

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down her body, and discolor her flesh, and redden her eyes and make them heavy. It was like an ever-growing disease, that was gradually making her heart and brain its prey. Her face seemed to be slumbering in some ecstatic trance, and her hands were shaken with a nervous trembling. A dry cough every now and then shook her from head to foot without her seeming conscious of how it was tearing her. The Abbé now showed himself sterner to her than before, and tried to crush down that love which was dawning within her, and forbade her to come to Saint-Saturnin's.

"The church is very cold," he said, "and you cough so much there. I don't want you to do anything to make yourself worse."

She protested that there was nothing the matter with her beyond a slight irritation of the throat, but at last she yielded and accepted his prohibition to go to the church as a well-deserved punishment which closed the doors of heaven against her.

The priest was afraid of the effect of the gloomy darkness of Saint Michael's chapel upon Marthe. He spoke upon the subject to Doctor Porquier, who persuaded Marthe to go to confession in the little oratory of the Home of the Virgin in the Suburb. The Abbé Faujas promised to be there to hear her every other Saturday. This oratory, which had been established in a large white-washed room with four great windows, was bright and cheerful and would, he calculated, have a calming effect upon the over-excited imagination of his penitent. There, he thought, he would be able to bring her under his control and reduce her to obedience, without having to fear a possible scandal. As a guard against all calumnious gossip, he asked his mother to accompany Marthe, and while he was confessing the latter, Madame Faujas remained outside the door. As the old lady was not fond

of wasting her time, she took her knitting with her and worked away at a stocking.

"My dear child," she often said to Marthe, as they were returning together to the Rue Balande, "I could hear very well what Ovide was saying to you to-day. You don't seem to be able to please him. You can't love him. I shall grow to hate you, if you go on causing me nothing but trouble."

Marthe bent her head. She felt a deep shame in Madame Faujas' presence. The old lady's dark eyes, too, troubled her as they were constantly bent upon her, seeming full of strange and disquieting hints.

Marthe's weak state of health was sufficient to account for her meetings with the Abbé Faujas in the oratory at the Home of the Virgin. Doctor Porquier stated that she did so simply in obedience to his orders, and the promenaders in the Cours were vastly amused at this saying of the doctor's.

"Well, all the same," said Madame Paloque to her husband one day, as she watched Marthe going down the Rue Balande, accompanied by Madame Faujas, "I should like to be in some corner and watch what the vicar does with his sweetheart. It is very amusing to hear her talk of her bad cold!"

"You are doing very wrongly to interfere in the Abbé Faujas' affairs," the judge said to her. "I have been spoken to about him. He is a man with whom we must be on good terms, and you will prevent us from being so; you are too spiteful."

"Stuff!" she retorted angrily; "they have trampled me under foot and I will let them know who I am! Your Abbé Faujas is a great imbecile! Don't you suppose that the Abbé Fenil would be very grateful to me if I could catch the vicar and his sweetheart making love? Ah! he would make a scandal like that very well worth



our while! Just you leave me alone; you don't understand anything about such matters."

A fortnight later, Madame Paloque watched Marthe and Madame Faujas go out on the Saturday. She was standing ready dressed behind her curtains, hiding her hideous face and keeping watch over the street through a hole in the muslin. When the two women disappeared round the corner of the Rue Taravelle, she sniggered with her gaping mouth. She leisurely drew on her gloves and then went quietly out into the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, and walked slowly round it. As she passed in front of Madame de Condamin's little house, she thought for a moment of going in and taking her with her, but she reflected that she might perhaps have scruples. And altogether, she told herself, it was better to be without witnesses, and to manage the business by herself.

"I have given them time," she thought, after a quarter of an hour's promenade, "to get to the deadly sins. I think I may present myself now."

Then she quickened her pace. She frequently went to the Home of the Virgin to discuss the accounts with Trouche, but to-day, instead of going into the secretary's offices, she went unhesitatingly through the corridor and toward the oratory. Madame Faujas was quietly knitting on a chair in front of the door.

The judge's wife had foreseen this obstacle. She went straight on to the door with the hasty manner of a person who has important business on hand, but before she could reach out her hand to turn the handle, the old lady had risen from her chair and pushed her away with an extraordinary amount of energy.

"Where are you going?" she asked in her blunt peasant woman's tones.

"I am going where I have business," Madame Paloque replied, her arm smarting and her face convulsed with

anger. "You are an insolent and brutish woman! Let me pass! I am the treasurer of the Home of the Virgin, and I have a right to go anywhere here I want."

Madame Faujas, who was standing leaning against the door, straightened her spectacles upon her nose, and resumed her knitting with the most unruffled tranquillity.

"No," she said bluntly, "you can't go in there."

"Can't indeed! And may I ask why?"

"Because I don't wish that you should."

The judge's wife felt that her plan was frustrated and she almost choked with spleen and anger. She was perfectly frightful to look at as she gasped and stammered out:

"I don't know who you are and I don't know what you are doing here. If I were to call out, I could have you arrested, for you have struck me. There must be some great wickedness going on at the other side of that door for you to have been put there to keep people from entering. I belong to the house, I tell you! Let me pass, or I shall call for help."

"Call for anyone you like," the old lady replied, shrugging her shoulders. "I have told you that you shall not go in, that I won't let you. How am I to know that you belong to the house? But it makes no difference whether you do or you don't. No one can go in. I won't let them."

Then Madame Paloque lost all control of herself, and she raised her voice and shrieked out:

"I have no occasion to go in now! I have learnt quite sufficient. You are the Abbé Faujas' mother, are you not? This is a very decent and pretty part for you to be playing! I wouldn't enter the room now! I wouldn't mix myself up with all this filthiness!"

Madame Faujas laid her knitting down upon the chair, and, bending slightly forward, gazed at Madame

Paloque with her glistening eyes through her spectacles, holding her hands a little in front of her as though she were about to spring upon the angry woman and silence her. She was just going to throw herself upon her, when the door was suddenly opened and the Abbé appeared on the threshold. He was in his surplice and he looked very stern.

"Well, mother," he said, "what is going on here?"

The old lady bent her head, and stepped back like a dog that is taking its place at its master's heels.

"Ah! is that you, dear Madame Paloque?" the priest continued; "do you want to speak to me?"

By a supreme effort of her will, the judge's wife had forced her face into a smile. She answered the priest in a tone that was terrible in its amiability and mingled irony.

"Ah! you were inside there were you, your reverence? If I had known that, I would not have insisted upon entering. I want to see the altar cloth, which must I think, be getting into a bad condition. I am a careful supervisor here, you know, and I keep my eye upon all these little details. But, of course, if you are engaged here, I wouldn't think of disturbing you. Pray go on with what you are doing; the house is yours. If madame had only just dropped me a word, I would have left her quietly to continue guarding you from being disturbed."

Madame Faujas allowed a growl to escape her, but a glance from her son reduced her to silence.

"Come in, I beg of you," he said; "you won't disturb me at all. I was confessing Madame Mouret who is not very well. Come in, by all means. The altar-cloth might really very well be changed, I think."

"Oh, no! I will come some other time," Madame Paloque replied. "I am quite distressed to have interrupted you. Pray go on, your reverence, pray go on!"



Notwithstanding her protestations, however, she entered the room. While she was examining the altar-cloth with Marthe, the priest began to chide his mother in low tones.

"Why did you prevent her coming in, mother? I never told you to allow no one to enter."

She gazed straight in front of her with her obstinate determined glance.

"She would have had to walk over my body before she got inside," she murmured.

"But why?"

"Because—Listen to me, Ovide; don't be angry; you know that it pains me to see you angry. You told me to accompany our landlady here, didn't you? Well, I thought you wanted me to stop inquisitive people's curiosity. So I took my seat out here. I can assure you that you were quite free to do anything you liked. No one should have put a head inside the door."

He seized his mother's hands and shook her as he cried:

"Why, mother, you couldn't have supposed—"

"I suppose nothing," she replied, with a sublime indifference. "You are quite free to do whatever pleases you, and whatever you do is right. You are my child; I would steal for you, I would."

The priest was no longer listening to her. He had let his mother's hands drop, and, as he gazed at her, he seemed to be lost in reflections, which made his face look harder and more austere than ever.

"No, never, never!" he exclaimed with lofty sternness. "You are greatly mistaken, mother. It is only the chaste who are powerful."

## XVI

At seventeen years of age, Désirée still preserved her innocent child-like laugh. She was now a fine, tall girl, plump and well developed, with the arms and shoulders of a full grown woman. She grew like a healthy plant, happy in her growth and development, and quite untouched by the unhappiness which was wrecking and casting a gloom over the house.

"Why do you never laugh?" she cried to her father one day. "Come and have a game at skipping-rope! It's such fun!"

She had taken possession of the whole of one of the beds of the garden, which she dug up and planted with vegetables which she carefully watered. The hard work delighted her. Then she had desired to have some fowls, which devoured her vegetables and which she scolded with a motherly tenderness. In these occupations of hers, in her gardening and fowl-keeping, she used to make herself dreadfully dirty.

"She's perfectly filthy!" cried Rose. "I won't have her coming into my kitchen any more; she dirties everything! It is no use your trying to keep her neatly dressed, madame. If I were you I should just leave her to mess about as she likes."

Marthe grew to feel a sort of disgust at her. When she returned home from mass, still retaining in her hair the vague odor of the church, she quite shuddered at the strong scent of earth which exhaled from her daughter. She sent her off into the garden again immediately breakfast was over. She could not bear to have her near her, and felt distressed and disquieted by her robust

vigor and her clear laugh which seemed to find amusement and happiness in everything.

"Oh, dear! how wearisome the child is!" she used to murmur sometimes, with an air of nerveless lassitude.

As Mouret heard her complain, he exclaimed in an impulse of anger:

"If she is in your way, we will turn her out of the house, as we have done the other two?"

"Indeed, I should be very glad if she were to go away," Marthe replied, unhesitatingly.

One afternoon, about the end of the summer, Mouret was alarmed at no longer being able to hear Désirée, who, a few minutes previously, had been making a tremendous noise at the bottom of the garden. He ran down to see what had happened to her, and he found her lying upon the ground. She had fallen from a ladder on to which she had mounted to gather figs; the box-plants had fortunately broken the force of her fall. Mouret, in a great fright, lifted her up in his arms and called for assistance. He thought she was dead; but she quickly came to herself and said she was none the worse and wanted to mount the ladder again.

Marthe, however, had in the meantime come down into the garden. When she heard Désirée laugh she seemed quite annoyed.

"That child will kill me one of these days," she exclaimed. "She seems to do nothing but try to alarm me. I am sure she threw herself down on purpose. I can't endure it any longer. I shall shut myself up in my own room, and when I go out in the morning I shall not return again till the evening. Yes, you may laugh, you great goose! To think that it's possible I should have brought such a ninny into the world! You are making me pay for it very dearly!"

"Yes, that she does!" cried Rose, who had run down



from the kitchen; "she is a great burden, and there is no chance of our ever being able to get her married."

Mouret looked at them and listened to them with a grieving heart. He made no remark, but he stayed with the young girl at the bottom of the garden and they remained out chatting affectionately together till night-fall. The next day, Marthe and Rose were away from the house the whole morning. They went to hear mass in a chapel, a league away from Plassans, that was dedicated to Saint-Januarius, to which all the pious folks of the town made a pilgrimage on this particular day. When they returned, the cook hastily served up a cold lunch. Marthe ate for a few minutes before she noticed that her daughter was not at table.

"Isn't Désirée hungry?" she asked. "Why hasn't she come to lunch?"

"Désirée is no longer here," answered Mouret, who left his food almost untouched upon his plate; "I took her this morning to Saint-Eutrope to her nurse's."

Marthe laid down her fork, and turned a little pale, seeming surprised and hurt.

"You ought to have consulted me," she said.

Her husband, without making any direct reply, continued:

"She is all right with her nurse. The good woman is very fond of her, and will look well after her, and the child will no longer be in your way, and every one will be happy."

Then, as his wife said nothing, he added:

"If the house is not yet sufficiently quiet for you, just tell me, and I will go away myself."

She half rose from her seat, and a light glistened in her eyes. Mouret had just wounded her so cruelly that she reached out her hand as though she were going to throw the water bottle at his head. She made a show

of eating again, but she said nothing further about her daughter. Mouret had folded his napkin, and he remained sitting in front of her, listening to the sound of her fork, and casting lingering glances round the dining-room that had once been so merry with the chatter of the children, but which was now so empty and mournful. The room seemed to him to be quite chilly, and tears were mounting to his eyes when Marthe called to Rose to bring in the dessert.

"You must be very hungry, I should think, madame," the cook said, as she put a plateful of fruit upon the table. "We have had a long walk; and if the master, instead of playing the pagan, had come with us, he would not have left you to eat the mutton all by yourself."

She changed the plates, without ceasing her chattering.

"It is very pretty is that chapel of Saint-Januaris, but it is too small. Did you see that the ladies who came late were obliged to kneel down outside on the grass, in the open air? I can't understand why Madame de Condamin came in a carriage. There's no merit in making the pilgrimage if you come that way. We spent a delightful morning, didn't we, madame?"

"Yes, a very delightful morning," Marthe replied. "The Abbé Mousseau, who preached, was very affecting."

When Rose in her turn noticed Désirée's absence and learnt of the girl's departure, she exclaimed:

"Well, really, it was a very good idea of the master's! She was always walking off with my saucepans to water her plants. We shall be able to have a little peace now."

"Yes, indeed," said Marthe, who was cutting a pear.

Mouret was almost choking. He got up and left the dining-room without paying any attention to Rose, who cried out to him that the coffee would be ready directly.

Marthe, now left alone in the room, tranquilly finished her pear.

Just as the cook was bringing the coffee, Madame Faujas came down-stairs.

"Go in," Rose said to her; "you will be company for madame, and you can have the master's cup, for he has just rushed off like a madman."

They talked for a good hour together, and Marthe ended by relating all her troubles to Madame Faujas, telling her how her husband had just been inflicting a most painful scene upon her on account of her daughter, whom he had taken off to her nurse's in a sudden whim. She defended herself and told Madame Faujas that she was really extremely fond of the girl, and that she should go for her some day soon.

"She was rather noisy, certainly," Madame Faujas remarked. "I have often pitied you. My son was thinking about giving over going into the garden to read his breviary. She almost distracted him with the noise she made."

From this day Marthe and Mouret took their meals in silence. The autumn was very damp, and the dining-room looked intensely melancholy with the two far apart covers, separated by the whole length of the big table. The corners were dark and gloomy, and the cold seemed to fall from the ceiling. As Rose would say, it looked as though a funeral were going on.

When the first frosts came, Rose, who sought in every way to oblige Madame Faujas, offered her the use of her stove for cooking. The old lady had commenced to bring down kettles of water to get them boiled, as she had no fire, she said, and the Abbé was in a hurry to shave himself. Then she borrowed some flat irons, and begged the use of some saucepans, and asked for the loan of the dutch-oven to cook some mutton, and then



in the end, as she had no conveniently arranged fire-place upstairs, she accepted Rose's offers, and the cook lighted a fire of vine branches, big enough to roast a whole sheep.

'Don't feel any diffidence about it," she said, as she herself turned the leg of mutton round; "the kitchen is a large one, isn't it? and big enough for us both. I don't know how you've been able to manage to do your cooking upstairs as long as you have done, with only that miserable iron stove. Monsieur Mouret ought to know better than to let a set of rooms without any kitchen."

Madame Faujas gradually began to cook her lunch and dinner in the Mourets' kitchen. The first few times she provided her own coal and oil and spices. But afterward, when she forgot to bring any article with her, Rose would not allow her to go upstairs for it, but insisted upon supplying the deficiency from the stores of the house.

"Oh! there's some butter there! The little bit which you will take with the end of your knife won't ruin us. Madame would be angry with me if I didn't make you quite at home here."

A close intimacy now sprang up between Rose and Madame Faujas. The cook was delighted to have some one always at hand who was willing to listen to her as she stirred her sauces. She got on extremely well with the priest's mother, whose print dresses and rough face and unpolished demeanor put her almost on a footing of equality with herself. They sat chatting together for hours before the fire-place, and Madame Faujas soon gained complete sway in the kitchen, though she still maintained her impenetrable attitude, and only said what she chose to say, while she contrived to worm out all that she wanted to know. She settled the Mourets' dinner, and tasted the dishes which she had arranged

they should have, and Rose herself often made savory little luxuries for the Abbé's delectation, such as sugared apples or rice-cakes or fritters. The provisions of the two establishments often got mixed up together, and the different pans got confused, and the two dinners got so intermingled that Rose would cry up laughingly as she was going to serve up the meat:

"Tell me, madame, are these poached eggs yours? Really, I don't know. Upon my word, it would be much better if you were all to dine together!"

It was on All Saints' Day that the Abbé Faujas lunched for the first time in the Mourets' dining-room. He was in a great hurry, as he had to return very shortly to Saint-Saturnin's, and so, to give him as much time as possible, Marthe made him sit down at their own table saying that it would save his mother having to mount up a couple of flights. A week later it had become a regular thing, and the Faujases came down-stairs at every meal and took their seats at the table, just as if they were entering a restaurant. For the first few days their provisions were cooked and served separately, but then Rose said this was a very silly arrangement, and that she could easily cook for four persons and that she would arrange it all with Madame Faujas.

"Pray don't thank me," she said to the Abbé and his mother; "it is a kindness on your part to come down and keep madame company. You will cheer her up a little. If the master chooses to go on sulking now, it will only be himself who will suffer from it, and he will have to sulk all by himself."

They kept up a roaring fire, and the room was very warm. They had a delightful winter, and Rose had never before taken such pains to have the table-linen in perfect order. She placed his reverence's chair near the

stove so that he had his back to the fire, and she paid him numberless other delicate little attentions.

When she had prepared any dish of which he was particularly fond, she gave him notice of it that he might reserve himself for it and she brought it into the room under a cover, exclaiming with an air of suppressed triumph:

"This is for his reverence! It is a wild-duck stuffed with olives, just what he is so fond of. Give his reverence the breast, madame." Marthe carved the duck and pressed the choicest morsels upon the Abbé with beseeching looks. She always helped him first, putting the daintiest portions of the dish upon his plate, while Rose bent over her and pointed out what she thought were the best parts. Rose used to push an embroidered hassock under the priest's feet, while Marthe insisted that he should always have his bottle of Bordeaux and his roll, ordering one of these specially for him every day from the baker.

"We can never do too much for you," Rose said when the Abbé expressed his thanks. "Who should be well looked after if it isn't good kind hearts like yours? Don't you trouble yourselves about it; the Lord will pay your debts for you."

Madame Faujas smiled at all these flattering civilities as she sat at the table opposite her son. She was beginning to be quite fond of Marthe and Rose and she considered their adoration only natural, and thought it a great happiness for them to be allowed to cast themselves in this way at the feet of her idol. It was really she with her square head and peasant manner who presided over the table, eating slowly but largely, and noticing everything that happened without once letting go her fork, while she took care that Marthe should not fail to play the part of servant to her son at whom



she was constantly gazing with an expression of pleased contentment.

The Abbé Faujas himself, however, seemed quite indifferent to all the tender cares which were lavished upon him. He had yielded to his mother's entreaties and had consented to join the Mourets, but the only satisfaction he experienced in the dining-room on the ground-floor was the pleasure of being set entirely free from the cares of material life. He manifested a most unruffled serenity, and he gradually ceased to manifest any surprise or express any thanks, lording it haughtily between the mistress of the house and the cook, who kept an anxious watch over the slightest motion of his stern face.

Mouret sat opposite his wife, quite forgotten and unnoticed. He let his hands rest upon the edge of the table, and waited, like a child, till Marthe was willing to attend to him. She helped him the last, scantily, and to whatever might happen to be left. Rose stood behind her and warned her when by mistake she was going to give her husband some of the more delicate morsels on the dish.

"No, no; not that. The master likes the head, you know. He enjoys sucking the little bones."

Mouret, snubbed and slighted, ate his food with a sort of shame as though he was subsisting unworthily on other people's bounty. He could see Madame Faujas watching him keenly as he cut his bread. He kept his eyes fixed on the bottle for a whole minute, full of doubtful hesitation, before he dare venture to help himself to the water. Once he made a mistake and took a little of the priest's Bordeaux. There was a tremendous fuss made about it, and for a whole month afterward Rose reproached him for those few drops of wine. When she made any sweet dish, she used to say:

"I don't want the master to have any of that. He never thinks anything I make is nice. Don't give any of it to the master, I beg of you, madame."

She did all she could, too, to worry and upset him. She gave him cracked plates, contrived that one of the table legs should come between his own, left shreds of the glass-cloth clinging to his glass and placed the bread and wine and salt as far from him as possible. But what made Mouret still more miserable and robbed him of all appetite was his expulsion from his own seat, in front of the window, which was now given to the priest, as being the pleasantest in the room. Mouret was made to sit with his face toward the door, and he felt as though he were eating amongst strangers now that he could not at each mouthful cast a glance at his fruit-trees.

Marthe was not so bitter against him as Rose was. She treated him like a poor relation, whose presence is just tolerated, and she gradually grew to almost ignore him altogether. Mouret, however, showed no inclination to rebel, and he occasionally exchanged a few polite phrases with the priest, though he generally ate in perfect silence and replied to the cook's attacks only by looking calmly at her.

Rose alleged that he was bursting with anger, and when she gossiped in the kitchen with Madame Faujas, she discussed her master freely.

"I know him very well; I've never been afraid of him. Before you came, madame used to tremble before him, for he was always scolding and blustering and trying to appear very terrible. Now he is as docile as a sheep, isn't he? It's just because madame has asserted herself. Ah! if he weren't a coward and weren't afraid of what might happen, you would hear a pretty row. But he is afraid of your son; yes, he is afraid of his reverence

the vicar. Anyone would say, to look at him, that he lost his senses every now and then. But after all, as long as he doesn't bother us any longer, he is welcome to act as he pleases; isn't he, madame?"

Madame Faujas replied that Monsieur Mouret seemed to her to be a very worthy man, and that his only fault was his lack of religion. When Mouret met her, he used to recall the day when the Faujases first arrived; when, wearing that shabby black dress of hers, she tenaciously clung to her basket with both hands and poked her head inquisitively into each room with all the unruffled serenity of a person inspecting a property for sale.

Since the Faujases had begun to take their meals downstairs, the Trouches were left in possession of the second-floor. They made a great deal of noise, and sounds of furniture being moved about and stamping of feet and loud voices and doors violently opened and closed again were heard by those downstairs. Madame Faujas at these times used to raise her head in the midst of her gossiping in the kitchen with an uneasy expression. Rose, for the sake of putting her at her ease, used to say that that poor Madame Trouche suffered a great deal of pain. One night, the Abbé, who had not yet gone to bed, heard a strange commotion on the staircase. He went out of his room with his candle in his hand, and he saw Trouche, disgracefully drunk, climbing up the stairs on his knees. He seized him in his strong arms and threw him into his room. Olympe was in bed, quietly reading a novel and sipping a glass of spirits that was standing on a little table at the bedside.

"Listen to me," said the Abbé Faujas, livid with rage, "you will pack up your things in the morning and take yourselves off!"



"Why? what for?" asked Olympe, quite calmly; "we are very comfortable here."

The priest interrupted her very sternly.

"Hold your tongue! You are a miserable woman, and you have never tried to do anything but injure me. Our mother was right; I should never have rescued you from your state of wretchedness. I've just had to pick your husband up on the stairs! It is disgraceful. Think of the scandal there would be, if he were to be seen in this state! You will go away in the morning."

Olympe sat up to take a drink of the spirits.

"No, no, indeed!" she said.

Trouche laughed. He was drunkenly merry. Then he fell back into an arm-chair in a state of happy complaisance.

"Don't let us quarrel," he stammered out "It is a mere nothing; only a little giddiness. The air, which is very cold, has made me dizzy, that's all. And your streets in this confounded town are so very confusing. I say, Faujas, there are some very nice young fellows about here. There is Doctor Porquier's son. You know Doctor Porquier, don't you? Well, I meet the son in a café behind the gaol. It is kept by a woman from Arles, a fine, handsome woman—"

The priest had crossed his arms and was looking at him with a terrible expression.

"No, really, Faujas, you are quite wrong to be angry with me. You know that I have been well brought up, and that I know how to behave myself. In the day-time I wouldn't even touch a drop of syrup for fear of compromising you. While I have been here I have gone to my office just like a boy going to school, with slices of bread and jam in a little basket. It's a very stupid sort of life, I can assure you, and I only do it to be of service to you. But at night, I'm not likely to be seen,

and I can go about a little. It does me good, and I should die if I kept myself locked up here always. There is no one in the streets, you know. What funny streets they are, eh!"

"Sot!" growled the priest from between his clinched teeth.

"You won't be friends, then? Well, that's very wrong of you, old chap. I'm a jolly fellow myself, and I don't like sour looks, and if what I do doesn't please you, I'll leave you to get on with your pious ladies by yourself. That little Condamin is the only decent one amongst them still, and she doesn't come up to the café-keeper from Arles. Oh, yes! you may roll your eyes about as much as you like. I can get on quite well without you. See! would you like me to lend you a hundred francs?"

He drew out a bundle of bank-notes and spread them on his knees, laughing loudly as he did so. Then he swept them under the Abbé's nose and threw them up in the air. Olympe sprang out of bed, half-naked, and picked up the notes and placed them under the bolster with an expression of vexation. The Abbé Faujas glanced round him in great surprise. He saw bottles of spirits arranged all along the top of the chest of drawers, a scarcely touched pie on the mantel-piece, and some sugar-plums in a tattered old box. The room was full of recent purchases; dresses thrown over the chairs, an opened parcel of lace, a magnificent new over-coat hanging from the window-catch, and a bear-skin spread out in front of the bed. By the side of Olympe's glass of grog on the little table there was a small, gold, lady's watch glittering in a porcelain tray.

"Whom have they been plundering, I wonder?" thought the priest.

Then he recollected having seen Olympe kissing Marthe's hands.

"You miserable people!" he cried; "you have been thieving!"

Trouche sprang up, but his wife pushed him down on to the couch.

"Keep yourself quiet!" she said to him, "and go to sleep, for you want it."

Then, turning to her brother, she continued:

"It is one o'clock and you might leave us to go to sleep if you have only disagreeable things to say to us. My husband is certainly wrong to intoxicate himself, but that's no reason why you should abuse him. We have already had several explanations; this one must be the last, do you understand, Ovide? We are brother and sister, are we not? Well, then, as I have told you before, we must go halves. You gorge yourself downstairs and you have all kinds of dainty dishes, and you live a fat life between the landlady and the cook. Well, you please yourself about that. We don't come and look into your plate nor try to pull the dainty morsels out of your mouth. We let you manage your affairs as you like. Very well then, do you leave us alone and allow us the same liberty. I don't think I am asking anything unreasonable."

The priest made a gesture of impatience.

"Oh yes, I understand," she continued; "you are afraid lest we should compromise you in your schemes. The best way to insure our not doing so is to leave us in peace and not to worry us. Ah! in spite of all your grand airs, you are not a very clever person. We have the same interests as you have, we are all of the same family, and we might very well hunt together. It would be much the best plan, if you would only see it. There, go to bed, now! I will scold Trouche in the morning,



and I will send him to you and you can give him your instructions."

"Ah! he is an odd person, that Faujas," muttered the drunken man who was half-asleep. "I don't want the landlady; I like her money much better."

Then Olympe broke out into an impudent laugh and looked at her brother. She had got into bed again, and had settled herself down comfortably with her back propped up against the pillow. The priest, who was a little pale, was thinking; then, without saying another word, he left the room, and Olympe resumed her novel while Trouche lay snoring on the couch.

The next morning, Trouche, who had recovered his soberness, had a long interview with the Abbé Faujas. When he returned to his wife, he informed her of the conditions upon which peace had again been patched up.

"Listen to me, my dear," Olympe said to him; "give way to him and do what he asks. Above all try to be useful to him, since he gives you the chance of being so. I put on a bold face when he is here, but in my own heart I know quite well that he will turn us out into the street like dogs if we push him too far, and I don't want to have to leave here. Are you sure that he will let us stay?"

"Oh yes; don't be afraid," the secretary replied. "He has need of me, and he will leave us to feather our nest."

The Trouches were also kept in check by Madame Faujas. The mother and the daughter were perpetually quarreling with each other; Olympe complaining that she was ever being sacrificed to her brother, and Madame Faujas treating her like a viper whom she ought to have crushed to death in her cradle. Madame Faujas wanted to claim everything in the house, and she tried to keep the mere sweepings from Olympe's clutching fingers. When

she saw the large sums that her daughter was drawing from Marthe's pocket, she was quite bursting with anger. When her son merely shrugged his shoulders like a man who despises such miserable matters, she, in her turn, had a stormy explanation with her daughter, whom she branded as a thief, as though she had taken the money from her own pocket.

"There, mother, that will do!" Olympe cried impatiently. "It isn't your purse, you know, that I have been lightening. Besides, I have only been borrowing a little money; I don't make other people keep me."

"What do you mean, you wicked hussy?" Madame Faujas gasped out, quite bursting with indignation. "Do you suppose that we don't pay for our food? Ask the cook, <sup>the</sup> and she will show you our account-book."

Olympe broke out into a loud laugh.

"Oh, yes, that's very nice!" she cried; "I know that account-book of yours! You pay for the radishes and butter, don't you? Stay downstairs by all means, mother, stay downstairs on the ground-floor. I don't want to interfere with your arrangements. But don't you come up here and worry me any more, or I shall make a row, and you know that Ovide has forbidden any noise up here."

Marthe had no notion of the drama that was being played so close to her. To her the house simply seemed more lively and cheerful, now that all these people thronged about the lobby and the staircase and the passages. It was as noisy as an hotel with all the suppressed sounds of quarreling, the banging of doors, the independent and free life of each of the tenants, and the flaming fire in the kitchen, where Rose seemed to have a whole table-d'hôte to provide for. There was a continual procession of tradesmen to the house. Olympe, who was very particular about her hands and refused to risk spoiling them by washing plates and dishes, had everything sent from

outside, from a confectioner's in the Rue de la Banne, who served meals to the towns-people.

Mouret, however, to escape from all this noise, used to shut himself up in a room on the first floor, which he called his office. He had overcome his distaste for solitude, and he scarcely ever now went down in the garden.

When the summer came round again, the house grew still livelier than before. The Abbé Faujas received the guests of the sub-prefecture and the president beneath the arbor at the bottom of the garden. Rose, by Marthe's orders, had bought a dozen rustic chairs, so that the visitors might enjoy the fresh air without the dining-room chairs having to be constantly disturbed. It was now quite a regular thing for the doors leading into the blind-alley to remain open every Tuesday afternoon, and the ladies and gentlemen came to salute the Abbé Faujas like friendly neighbors. The visitors arrived one by one, and then the two sets of guests gradually found themselves all mixed up together, gossiping and amusing themselves in the most complete familiarity.

"Aren't you afraid," said Monsieur de Bourdeu to Monsieur Rastoil one day, "that these meetings with the sub-prefect's friends may be ill-advised? The general elections are getting near."

"Why should they be ill-advised?" Monsieur Rastoil asked. "We don't go to the Sub-Prefecture; we keep on neutral ground. I keep my linen coat on, and it's merely a private friendly visit. No one has any right to pass judgment upon what I do at the back of my house. In the front, it's another matter. In the front, we belong to the public. When Monsieur Péqueur and I meet each other in the streets we merely bow."

"Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies is a man who gains much by being known," the ex-prefect ventured to say, after a short silence.



"Certainly, certainly," replied the president; "I am delighted to have made his acquaintance. And what a worthy man the Abbé Faujas is! No, no; I have no fear of any calumnies arising from our going to salute our excellent neighbor."

Since the general elections had begun to be the subject of conversation, Monsieur de Bourdeu had been very uneasy; he said that it was the increasing warmth that affected him. He frequently was assailed with doubts and scruples, which he confided to Monsieur Rastoil, that the latter might remove them and reassure him. Politics, however, were never mentioned in the Mourets' garden. One afternoon, Monsieur de Bourdeu, after having vainly tried to find some means of leading up to the matter, exclaimed abruptly, addressing himself to Doctor Porquier:

"Tell me, doctor, have you seen the 'Moniteur' this morning? The marquis has at last spoken! He uttered just thirteen words; I counted them. Poor Lagrifoul! He has made himself very ridiculous!"

The Abbé Faujas raised his finger with an arch look. "No politics, gentlemen, no politics," he said.

Monsieur Péqueur des Sualaises was chatting with Monsieur Rastoil, and they both affected not to have heard what was said. Madame de Condamin smiled as she continued her conversation with the Abbé Surin.

"Aren't your surplices stiffened with a very weak solution of gum, your reverence?" she asked.

"Yes, madame, with a weak solution of gum," the young priest replied. "Some laundresses use boiled starch, but that spoils the material and is worthless."

"Well," returned the young woman, "I never can get my laundress to use gum for my petticoats."

The Abbé Faujas was very polite and amiable to all his visitors, even to the terrible Condamin who caused so much

disquietude. He effaced himself as much as possible, spoke but little, and allowed the two sets of guests to coalesce, seeming merely to experience the quiet satisfaction of a host who is happy to be the means of bringing together a number of distinguished people, who were intended to be on good terms with each other. Marthe had upon two occasions made her appearance, thinking that she would put the visitors more at their ease by doing so; but it distressed her to see the Abbé in the midst of so many people, and she much preferred to see him walking slowly and seriously in the quiet of the arbor. The Trouches resumed their Tuesday watchings behind their curtains, while Madame Faujas and Rose craned their heads out from the doorway and admired with great delight the graceful manner in which his reverence received the chief people of Plassans.

"Ah, madame!" said the cook, "it is very easy to see that he is a distinguished person. Look at him bowing to the sub-prefect. I admire his reverence the most; though, indeed, the sub-prefect is a fine man. Why do you never go into the garden to them? If I were you, I would put on a silk dress and join them. You are his mother, you know, after all."

But the old peasant woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh! he isn't ashamed of me," she said; "but I prefer watching him from here; and I enjoy it more."

"Yes, I can understand that. Ah! you must be very proud of him. He isn't a bit like Monsieur Mouret, who nailed the door up, so that no one could come through it. There he is, shut up in his room, as though he were afraid they would give him the itch! By the way, shall we go up sometime and try to find out what he does?"

One Tuesday they went upstairs together. On that afternoon the visitors had been very merry, and the sound

of their laughter floated into the house through the open windows. Mouret was securely locked up in his office. "The key prevents me from seeing," said Rose, who had applied her eye to the key-hole.

"Wait a moment," murmured Madame Faujas. She turned the end of the key, which protruded slightly, very carefully. Mouret was sitting in the middle of the room in front of a great empty table, coated with a thick layer of dust. There was not a single paper nor book upon it. He was lying back in his chair, his arms hanging listlessly down, gazing blankly into space. He sat perfectly still, without the slightest movement.

The two women looked at him in silence, one after the other.

"He has made me feel cold to the very marrow," exclaimed Rose, as they went downstairs again. "Did you notice his eyes? And what a state of filth the room is in! He hasn't laid a pen on that desk for a couple of months past, and I thought he spent all his time therein writing. Fancy him amusing himself by shutting himself up all alone like a corpse, when the house is so bright and cheerful!"

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## XVII

Marthe's health was causing Doctor Porquier much anxiety. He still smiled in his pleasant way, and talked to her after the manner of a fashionable medical man for whom disease has never any existence, and who grants a consultation just as a dress-maker fits on a new dress; but there was a certain twist of his lip which told that the "dear madame" had something more seriously wrong with her than a slight spitting of blood, as he tried to



persuade her. He advised her, now that the warm weather had come, to get a little change of surroundings and occupation by going out for drives, but taking care not to overfatigue herself. In obedience to the doctor's directions, Marthe, twice a week, drove off, after luncheon, in an old refurbished carriage, which she hired from a coachbuilder in Plassans. She generally used to drive some six or seven miles, so as to get back home about six o'clock. Her great desire was to induce the Abbé Faujas to go with her, and it was only in the hope of accomplishing this that she had conformed with the doctor's directions; but the Abbé, without distinctly refusing to go with her, always excused himself on the ground that he was too busy to spare the time, and Marthe was obliged to content herself with the companionship of Olympe or Madame Faujas.

One afternoon as she was driving with Olympe toward the village of Les Tulettes, past the little estate of her uncle Macquart, the latter caught sight of her as he was standing upon his terrace, which was ornamented with two mulberry trees.

"Where is Mouret?" he cried. "Why hasn't Mouret come as well?"

Marthe was obliged to stop for a moment or two to speak to her uncle, and to explain to him that she was not well, and could not stay to dine with him. He had expressed his determination to kill a fowl for the meal.

"Well," he said at last, "I will kill it all the same, and you shall take it away with you."

Then he hurried off to kill the fowl at once. When he came back with it, he laid it on the stone table in front of the house and exclaimed with an expression of immense satisfaction:

"Isn't it a plump, splendid fellow?"

When Marthe and Olympe drove up, Macquart had just

been about to drink a bottle of wine under the shade of his mulberry trees, in company with a tall, thin young man, dressed entirely in gray. He persuaded the two women to leave the carriage and come and sit down for a time, and he brought them chairs and did the honors of his house with a snigger of satisfaction.

"Have you seen your father lately?" he asked, abruptly. "Rougon isn't a very amiable person. That corn-field over yonder to the left is for sale. If he had been willing we might have bought it. What would it have been to a man of his means? A paltry three thousand francs is all that is asked for it, but he refuses to have anything to do with it. The last time I went to see him he even made your mother tell me that he wasn't at home. Well, you'll see that that will be all the worse for them in the end."

He wagged his head and broke out into his unpleasant laugh, as he repeated several times over:

"Yes, yes; it will be all the worse for them."

Then he went off to get some glasses, insisting upon making the two women taste his wine. It was that light wine which he had discovered at Saint-Eutrope, and in which he took a great pride. Marthe scarcely wetted her lips, but Olympe finished the bottle. Then she accepted a glass of syrup, saying that the wine was very strong.

"And what have you done with your priest?" the uncle asked quite suddenly of his niece.

Marthe looked at him in surprise and displeasure without making any reply.

"I heard that he was sponging on you tremendously," her uncle continued loudly. "These priests are fond of good living. When I heard about him, I said that it served Mouret quite right. I warned him. Well I shall be glad to help you to turn him out of the house. Mouret has only got to come and ask me and I will give him

a helping hand. I've never been able to endure those fellows. I know one of them, the Abbé Fenil, who has a house on the other side of the road. He is no better than the rest of them, but he is as malicious as an ape, and he amuses me. I fancy he does not get on very well with that priest of yours; isn't that so, eh?"

Marthe had turned very pale.

"Madame here is the sister of his reverence the Abbé Faujas," she said, turning to Olympe, who was listening with much curiosity.

"What I said has no reference to madame," Macquart replied quite unconcernedly. "Madame, I am sure, is not offended. She will take another glass of syrup?"

Olympe accepted another glass of the syrup, but Marthe rose from the seat and wanted to leave. Her uncle, however, insisted upon taking her over his grounds. At the end of the garden she stopped to look at a great white house that was built on the slope of the hill, a few hundred yards from Les Tulettes. Its inner courts looked like prison-yards, and the narrow symmetrical windows which streaked the front with their black lines gave to the main building the cheerless, naked look of a hospital.

"That is the Lunatic Asylum," cried Macquart, who had followed in the direction of Marthe's eyes. "The young man here is one of the warders. We get on very well together, and he comes every now and then to have a bottle of wine with me."

Then, turning toward the man in gray, who was finishing his glass beneath the mulberry tree, he called out:

"Here, Alexandre, come and show my niece which is our poor old woman's window."

Alexandre came politely up to them.

"Do you see those three trees?" he said, stretching out his finger, as though he were drawing a plan in the



air. "Well, a little below the one to the left, you can see a fountain in the corner of a court-yard. Follow the windows on the ground floor to the right; it is the fifth one."

Marthe stood in silence with blanched lips and her eyes fixed, in spite of herself, on the window which was pointed out to her. Uncle Macquart was looking at it as well, but with a complaisance which manifested itself in his blinking eyes.

"I see her sometimes of a morning," he said, "when the sun is on the other side. She keeps very well, does she not, Alexandre? I always tell them so when I go to Plassans. I am very well placed here to keep a watch upon her. I couldn't be anywhere better."

He broke out into his snigger of satisfaction.

"The Rougons, you know, my dear, have got no stronger heads than the Macquarts, and I often tell myself, as I sit out here in front of that big house, that all the lot will perhaps join the mother there some day. Thank Heaven, I've no fear about myself. My noddle is firmly fixed on. But I know some of them who are a little shaky. Well, I shall be here to receive them, and I shall see them from my den, and I will recommend them to Alexandre's kind attention, though they haven't all of them always been particularly kind to me."

Then with that hideous smile of his that was like a captive wolf's, he added:

"It's very lucky for you all that I am here on the spot at Les Tulettes."

Marthe could not help trembling all over. Though she was well aware of her uncle's taste for savage pleasantries, and the pleasure he took in torturing the people to whom he presented his rabbits, she could not help fancying that he was perhaps speaking the truth, and that all the rest of the family would indeed come and

take up their quarters in those gloomy tiers of cells. She insisted upon taking her immediate departure in spite of the pressing entreaties of Macquart, who wanted to open another bottle of wine.

"Ah! where is the fowl?" he cried, just as she was getting into the carriage. He went back to find it, and he brought it and placed it upon her knees.

"It is for Mouret, you understand," he said, with a malicious expression; "for Mouret, and for no one else. When I come to see you, I will ask him how he liked it."

He winked his eyes as he glanced at Olympe. The coachman was just going to whip his horse forward, when Macquart laid hold of the carriage again, and said:

"Go and see your father and talk to him about the corn-field. See, it is that field just in front of us. Rougon is making a mistake. We are too old friends to quarrel about the matter; besides, as he very well knows, it would be worse for him, if we did. Let him understand that he is making a mistake."

Marthe was undergoing a complete change; she was becoming quite another woman. She had grown much more refined from the life of nervous excitement which she had been leading. She dressed herself better than she had been used to do, and she joined in the conversation when she went to the Rougons' on Thursdays.

"Madame Mouret is growing into quite a young girl again," exclaimed Madame de Condamin in amazement.

"Yes, indeed," replied Doctor Porquier, nodding his head; "she is going through life backward."

Marthe, now grown much slimmer, with rosy cheeks and magnificent black flashing eyes, burst out for some months into singular beauty. Her face beamed with

animation, and an extraordinary out-pouring of vitality seemed to be flooding her whole being and thrilling her with vibrating warmth. She was overwhelmed with a perpetual need and craving for prayer and devotion, and she no longer obeyed the Abbé Faujas' instructions. She wore out her knees upon the flag-stones at Saint Saturnin's, lived in the midst of canticles and offerings of praise and worship, and took a sweet comfort to herself in the presence of gleaming monstrances and brightly lit chapels, and priests and altars that glittered with star-like sheen through the dark gloom of the cathedral nave. She was compelled by her very suffering—she would have died if she had not yielded—to give her passion something on which to feed, to come and prostrate herself humbly in confession, to bow in lowly awe amidst the thrilling peals of the organ, and to faint with melting joy in the ecstasy of communion.

The Abbé Faujas redoubled the severity of his demeanor toward her and tried to check her by the rudeness of his manner. He was amazed at this passionate awakening of Marthe's soul, at this ardent love of hers which was wearing her away. He frequently questioned her again on the subject of her childhood, and he went to see Madame Rougon, and remained for a long time in a state of great perplexity and dissatisfaction.

The Abbé Faujas himself at last began to understand the necessity of no longer treating Marthe with harsh rudeness. He began to fear an outburst. He gradually allowed her greater liberty, permitted her to seclude herself, to make long courses of devotion and to offer prayers at each of the Stations of the Cross, and he even gave her permission to come twice a week to his confessional at Saint-Saturnin's. Marthe, now no longer thrilled by that terrible voice which seemed to impute her piety to her as a vice for which she sought a shameful satis-



faction, believed that God had pardoned her and poured out His grace upon her. Now at last she thought she was entering upon all the joys of Paradise. She was overwhelmed with trances of sweet emotion, with inexhaustible floods of tears, which she shed without being conscious of their flow, and with nervous ecstasies from which she recovered weak and faint as though all her life-blood had evaporated from her veins. At these times, Rose would take her and lay her upon her bed, where she would lie for hours with the pinched lips and half-closed eyes of a dead woman.

One afternoon the cook, alarmed at her state of perfect motionlessness, was afraid that she was dead. She never thought of knocking at the door of the room where Mouret had shut himself up, but she went straight to the second floor and besought the Abbé Faujas to come down to her mistress. When he reached Marthe's bedroom, Rose hastened off to find some ether, leaving the priest alone with the swooning woman lying across her bed. He merely took her hands within his own. Then Marthe began to move about and talk incoherently. When at last she recognized him standing by her bed side, a crimson tide of blood surged to her face, and she turned her head round on the pillow.

"Are you feeling better, my dear child?" he asked her. "You are making me very uneasy."

Her throat was too much choked for her to be able to reply to him, and she burst into tears, as she let her head slip upon the priest's arm.

"I am not ill," she murmured in a voice so feeble that it was scarcely more than a breath; "I am too happy. Let me cry; I feel a joy in my tears. How kind of you to have come! I have been expecting you and calling for you for a long time."

Her face broke into a smile as she breathed out these

words of longing love, and she clasped her hands together as she fancied she saw the Abbé Faujas' grave face circled by an aureole. The priest had hitherto always succeeded in checking a confession of this sort on Marthe's lips; he felt alarmed for a moment and hastily withdrew his arms. Then, standing quite upright, he said authoritatively:

"Be calm and reasonable; I desire you to be so. God will refuse your homage if you do not offer it to him in calm reason. What presses most now is to restore your strength."

Rose returned to the room, quite distracted at not being able to find the ether. The priest told her to remain by the bedside, while he said to Marthe in gentle tones:

"Don't distress yourself. God will be touched by your love. When the proper time comes, he will come down into you and fill you with an everlasting felicity."

Then he quitted the room, leaving Marthe quite radiant and like one raised from the dead. From this day he was able to mold her like soft wax beneath his touch. She became extremely useful to him in certain delicate missions to Madame de Condamin, and she frequently visited Madame Rastoil upon his merely expressing a desire that she should do so. She rendered him an absolute obedience, never seeking the reason of anything he told her to do, and saying just what he instructed her to say. He no longer observed any precaution toward her, but bluntly taught her her lessons and made use of her as though she were a mere machine. She would have begged in the streets if he had ordered her to do so. When she became restless and disturbed and stretched out her hands to him, with bursting heart and lips swollen with passion, he suppressed her with a single word, and crushed her to the ground beneath the

will of heaven. She never dared to make any reply.

Between her and the priest there was a wall of anger and scorn. When the Abbé Faujas came away from one of the short struggles he used occasionally to have with her, he shrugged his shoulders with the disdain of a strong wrestler who has been opposed by a child; and he washed and brushed himself as though he had involuntarily touched some unclean animal.

Though Marthe was so pliant in the hands of the priest and was nothing but a mere chattel for him, she grew sourer and more querulous every day amidst all the little cares of household life. It was against her husband that she specially manifested an increasing bitterness and dislike. When Madame Faujas or Olympe came down-stairs to sit with her in the dining-room, she no longer observed any reticence but gave full vent to her bitterness against Mouret. Everything that he did, his looks, his gestures, the few words he uttered, all seemed to put her beside herself. She could not even see him without being carried away by an unreasoning anger. It was at the close of their meals, when Mouret, without waiting for the dessert, folded his napkin and silently rose from the table, that quarrels more especially occurred.

"You might leave the table at the same time as other people," Marthe would say bitterly; "it is not very polite of you to behave in that way."

"I have finished, and I am going away," Mouret replied in his slow tones.

He finished folding his napkin perfectly calm as though he had not heard a word of what his wife had been saying, and then, with slow and deliberate steps, he left the room. They could hear him go up-stairs and lock himself in his office. Then Marthe, choking with anger, burst out.



"Oh, the monster! He is killing me; he is killing me!"

Some of their quarrels were especially violent. Marthe, whose reason was on the verge of giving away, had got it into her head that her husband wanted to beat her. It was a fixed idea of hers. He had not dared to do it yet, she said, because he never found her alone, and in the night-time he was afraid lest she should cry out for assistance. Rose swore that she had seen her master hiding a thick stick in his office. Madame Faujas and Olympe showed no hesitaton in believing these stories, and they expressed the greatest pity for their landlady, and they discussed her troubles and constituted themselves her protectors. The house was now in a constant state of alarm.

"He is capable of any wickedness," the cook exclaimed.

This year Marthe observed all the religious ceremonies of Passion Week with the greatest fervor. On Good Friday, in the black-draped church, while the candles were extinguished, one by one, amidst the mournful swell of voices which rose through the gloom-shrouded nave, it seemed to her as though her own breath was dying away with the light of the candles. When the last one went out, and the black gloom in front of her seemed implacable and repelling, she fainted away. For an hour she remained bent in an attitude of prayer without the women who were kneeling around her being aware of the state in which she was. When she returned to herself, the church was deserted. She imagined that she was being scourged with twigs and that the blood was streaming from her limbs; and she experienced such excruciating pains in her head that she raised her hands to it, as if to pull out the thorns whose points she felt piercing her skull. She was in a strange condition at din-

ner that evening. She was still suffering from nervous excitement; when she closed her eyes, she saw the souls of the expiring candles flitting away through the darkness, and she examined her hands mechanically, looking for the wounds from which her blood had streamed. All the Passion was bleeding in her.

Madame Faujas, seeing her so ill, persuaded her to go to rest early, and she accompanied her to her room and put her to bed. Mouret, who had a key of the bedroom, had already retired to his office, where he spent his evenings. When Marthe, covered up to her chin with the blankets, said she was quite warm and was feeling better, Madame Faujas was going to blow out the candle that she might be better able to sleep; but Madame Mouret sprang up in fear and cried beseechingly:

"No! no! don't put out the light! Put it on the bureau so that I can see it. I should die if I were left in the dark!"

She fell back upon the pillow and seemed to drop asleep, and then Madame Faujas silently left the room. This evening all the house was in bed by ten o'clock. As Rose went upstairs, she noticed that Mouret was still in his office. She looked through the key-hole and saw him lying asleep, with his head upon the table, with a kitchen-candle smoking dismally by his side.

"Well, I won't wake him," she said to herself as she continued her journey upstairs. "Let him get a stiff neck, if he likes to."

About midnight, when the whole house was wrapped in sleep, cries were heard proceeding from the first floor. At first they were dull wails, but they soon grew into loud shrieks, like the hoarse and choking calls for aid of one who is being murdered. The Abbé Faujas, awaking with a start, called out to his mother, who scarcely gave

herself time to slip on a petticoat before going to knock at Rose's door and crying out:

"Come down immediately! I'm afraid Madame Mouret is being murdered."

The screams rose louder than ever. The whole house was quickly stirring. Olympe made her appearance with her shoulders simply covered with a neckerchief, followed by Trouche, who had only a very short time before returned home, slightly intoxicated. Rose hastened down the stairs followed by the lodgers.

"Open the door, madam, open the door!" she cried excitedly, hammering with her fist upon Madame Mouret's door.

Deep sighs were the only answer returned; then there was the sound of a body falling, and a terrible struggle seemed to be going on on the floor in the midst of overturned furniture. The walls shook with heavy blows, and a sound like a death-rattle passed under the door, so terrible that the Faujases and the Trouches turned pale as they looked at each other.

"Her husband is murdering her," Olympe murmured.

"Yes, you are right; the brute is killing her," said the cook. "I saw him pretending to be asleep as I came up to bed. He was planning it all then."

Then she began to thunder again upon the door with her two fists, almost heavily enough to break it.

"Open the door, sir! We shall go for the police if you don't. Oh, the scoundrel! he will end his days on the scaffold!"

Then the groans and cries began again. Trouche said that the blackguard must be bleeding the poor lady like a fowl.

"We must do something more than knock at the door," said the Abbé Faujas, coming forward. "Wait a moment."



He put one of his broad shoulders against the door and forced it open with a slow continued effort. The women rushed into the room where the most extraordinary spectacle met their eyes.

Marthe was lying panting on the middle of the floor, her night-dress torn and her flesh bleeding from scratches and grazes and discolored with blows. Her disheveled hair was twisted round the leg of a chair, and her hands had so firmly gripped the chest of drawers, that it was pulled out of its place and was now in front of the door. Mouret was standing in a corner, holding the candle and gazing at his wife writhing on the floor with an expression of stupefaction on his face.

The Abbé Faujas had to push away the chest of drawers.

"You are a monster!" cried Rose, rushing up to Mouret and shaking her fist at him. "To treat a woman like this! He would have killed her, if we hadn't got here in time to prevent him."

Madame Faujas and Olympe bent down over Marthe.

"Poor dear!" said the former. "She had a presentiment of something this evening and she was quite frightened."

"Where are you hurt?" Olympe asked. "There is nothing broken, is there? Look at her shoulder, it's quite black; and her knee is dreadfully grazed. Make yourself easy; we are with you and we will protect you."

Marthe was now only wailing like a child. While the two women were examining her, forgetting that there were men in the room, Trouche craned his head forward and cast leering glances at the Abbé, who was quietly putting the furniture in order. Rose helped Madame Faujas and Olympe to put Marthe back to bed, and when they had done so and had knotted up her hair, they all lingered for a moment, looking curiously round the room and waiting for explanations. Mouret was still standing in

the same corner holding the candle, and looking as though he were quite petrified by what he had seen.

"I assure you," he said, "that I haven't hurt her; I haven't touched her with the tip of my finger."

"You've been waiting for your opportunity this month past," cried Rose furiously; "we all know that well enough; we have watched you. The dear lady was quite expecting your brutality. Don't tell lies about it; that puts me quite beside myself!"

The two other women cast threatening glances upon him, though they did not feel themselves authorized to speak to him in the same way as Rose had done.

"I assure you," repeated Mouret in a gentle voice, "that I have not struck her. I was just going to get into bed, and the moment I touched the candle, which was standing on the drawers she awoke with a start and stretched out her arms with a cry, and then she began to beat her forehead with her fists and to tear her flesh with her nails."

The cook shook her head with a terrible expression.

"Why didn't you open the door?" she cried; "we knocked long enough."

"I assure you that I have done nothing," he reiterated still more gently than before. "I could not tell what was the matter with her. She threw herself onto the floor and bit herself and leaped about so violently as to almost break the furniture. I did not dare to go near her; I was quite overcome. I cried out to you twice to come in, but she was screaming so loudly that she must have prevented you from hearing me. I was in a terrible fright. But I have done nothing, I assure you."

"Oh yes! She's been beating herself, hasn't she?" jeered Rose.

Then, addressing herself to Madame Faujas, she added:

"He threw his stick out of the window, I've no doubt, when he heard us coming."

Mouret at last put the candle back upon the chest of drawers and seated himself on a chair, placing his hands upon his knees. He made no further attempt to defend himself. The poor fellow had not a very ferocious appearance as he sat there in his night-dress, with a yellow handkerchief tied round his bald head. They all closed round the bed and looked at Marthe, who, with her contorted face, seemed to be waking up from a dream.

"What is the matter, Rose?" she asked. "What are all these people doing here. I am quite broken down and exhausted. Ask them, I beg you, to leave me in peace."

Rose hesitated for a moment.

"Your husband is in the room, madame," she said at last. "Aren't you afraid to remain alone with him?"

Marthe looked at her with astonishment.

"No, no; not at all," she replied, "Go away; I am very sleepy."

Then the five people quitted the room, leaving Mouret sitting on the chair, staring blankly toward the bed.

"He won't be able to fasten the door again," the cook exclaimed as she went back up-stairs. "At the very first sound I shall fly down and be at him. I shall go to bed with my things on. Did you hear what stories the dear lady told to prevent his appearing such a brute? She would let herself be murdered before she would accuse him. What a hypocritical face he has got, hasn't he?"

The three women stood talking for a few moments on the landing of the second floor, holding their candlesticks in their hands. Then they separated. The house resumed its former quietness, and the remainder of the night passed away peacefully. The next morning, when



the three women eagerly referred to the terrible scene, they found Marthe nervous, and apparently shamefaced and confused. She made no replies to them and cut the conversation short. She waited till she was alone before she went for a workman to come and mend the door. Madame Faujas and Olympe came to the conclusion that Madame Mouret's reticence was caused by her desire to prevent a scandal.

The next day, Easter Day, Marthe tasted at Saint-Saturnin's the sweetness of an ardent awaking of her soul in the triumphant joys of the resurrection. The gloom of Good Friday was swept away by the brightness of Easter. She returned home with glistening eyes and a hot, dry tongue, and she sat up late, talking with a gayety that was unusual in her. When at last she went upstairs Mouret was already in bed. About midnight, terrible cries again echoed through the house.

The scene of two days before was repeated; only on this occasion, at the first knock at the door, Mouret, in his night-dress and with distracted face, at once came and opened it. Marthe, completely dressed, was lying on her stomach, sobbing violently and beating her head against the foot of the bed. The bodice of her dress looked as though it had been torn open, and there were two bruises on her naked throat.

"He has been trying to strangle her this time!" Rose exclaimed. The women undressed her. Mouret, after he had opened the door, had got back into bed, trembling all over and as pale as a sheet. He made no attempt to defend himself and did not even appear to hear the indignant remarks that were made about him, but he simply covered himself up and lay close to the wall. Similar scenes now took place at irregular intervals. The house lived in a state of fear of a crime being committed; and, at the slightest noise, the occupants of the

second-floor were astir. Marthe still avoided all allusions to the matter, and she absolutely forbade Rose to prepare a folding bed for Mouret in his office. When the morning came, it seemed to take away from her the very recollection of the scene of the night.

However, it gradually became bruited about in the neighborhood that strange things were happening at the Mourets'. It was reported that the husband belabored his wife every night with a bludgeon. Rose had made Madame Faujas and Olympe swear that they would say nothing about the subject, as her mistress seemed to wish to keep silent upon it; but she herself, by her expressions of pity and her allusions and reservations had materially contributed to setting afloat amongst the tradesmen the stories that were now being circulated. The butcher, who was a great joker, asserted that Mouret had thrashed his wife because he had found her with the priest, but the green-grocer's wife defended "the poor lady," who was, she declared, an innocent lamb who was quite incapable of doing wrong. The baker's wife considered that Mouret was one of those men who ill-treat their wives for mere pleasure and amusement. In the market-place people raised their eyes to heaven when they spoke of her, and they referred to her in the same terms of caressing endearment that they would have used in speaking of a sick child. When Olympe went to buy a pound of cherries or a basket of strawberries, the conversation inevitably turned upon the Mourets, and for a quarter of an hour there was nothing but a stream of sympathetic words.

"Well how are things getting on in your house?"

"Oh, don't speak of it! She is weeping her life away. It is most pitiable. One could almost wish to see her die."

"She came to buy some anchovies the other day, and I noticed that one of her cheeks was torn."

"Oh yes! he nearly kills her! If you could only see her body as I have seen it! It is nothing but one big sore. When she is down on the ground he kicks her with his heels. I am in constant fear of finding that he has split her head open during the night when we come down in the morning."

"It must be very unpleasant for you, living in such a house. I should go somewhere else, if I were in your place. It would make me quite ill to be mixed up with such horrors every night."

"But what would become of the poor woman? She is so refined and gentle! We stay on for her sake—five sous, isn't it, this pound of cherries?"

"Yes; five sous. Well it's very faithful of you, and you show a kind heart."

The story, however, was not credited among the higher classes of the inhabitants of Plassans. When it was mooted about the Cours Sauvaire it afforded the retired traders much amusement, as they sat in rows upon the seats, basking in the warm May sun.

"Mouret is quite incapable of beating his wife," said the retired almond-dealer; "he looks as though he had had a whipping himself, and he no longer even comes out for a turn on the promenade. His wife must be keeping him on dry bread."

"One can never tell," said a retired captain; "I knew an officer in my regiment whose wife used to box his ears for a mere yes or no. That went on for ten years. Then one day she took it into her head to kick him; that made him quite furious and he nearly strangled her. Perhaps Mouret has the same dislike to being kicked as my friend had."



"He has probably a still greater dislike to priests," said another of the company with a snigger.

For some time Madame Rougon appeared quite unconscious of the scandal which was occupying the attention of the town. She preserved a smiling face and ignored the allusions which were made before her. One day, however, after a long visit from Monsieur Delangre, she arrived at her daughter's house with an expression of great distress and her eyes filled with tears.

"Ah, my dear!" she cried, clasping Marthe in her arms, "what is this that I have just heard? Can your husband really have so far forgotten himself as to have raised his hand against you? It is all a pack of falsehoods, isn't it? I have given it the strongest denial. I know Mouret. He has been badly brought up, but he is not a wicked man."

Marthe blushed. She felt that embarrassment and shame-faced confusion which she experienced every time this subject was alluded to in her presence.

"Ah! madame will never complain!" cried Rose with her customary boldness. "I should have come and informed you a long time ago if I had not been afraid of madame being angry with me."

The old lady let her hands fall with an expression of extreme and shocked surprise.

"It is really true, then," she exclaimed, "that he beats you? Oh, the wretch! the wretch!"

Then she began to cry.

"For me to have lived to my age to see such things! A man that we have overwhelmed with kindnesses ever since his father's death, when he was only a little clerk with us! It was Rougon who desired your marriage. I told him more than once Mouret looked like a scoundrel. He has never treated us well; and he only retired to Plassans for the sake of setting us at defiance with the

few sous he has got together. Thank heaven, we stand in no need of him; we are richer than he is, and it is that that annoys him. He is very mean-spirited, and he is so jealous that he has always refused to set foot in my drawing-room. He knows he would burst with envy. But I won't leave you in the power of such a monster, my dear. There are laws, happily."

"Oh don't be uneasy! There has been very much exaggeration I can assure you," said Marthe, who was growing more and more ill at ease.

"You see that she is trying to defend him!" cried the cook.

At this moment, the Abbé Faujas and Trouche, who were in deep consultation at the bottom of the garden, came up attracted by the sound of the voices.

"I am a most unhappy mother, your reverence," said Madame Rougon piteously. "My daughter is no longer under my protection and I hear that she is weeping her eyes out from ill-treatment. I beg of you who live in the same house, to protect and console her."

The Abbé fixed his eyes upon her as though he were trying to find the key to this sudden manifestation of distress.

"I have just seen some one whom I had rather not name," she continued, returning the Abbé's gaze. "This person has quite alarmed me. God knows that I don't want to do anything to injure my son-in-law! But it is my duty—is it not?—to defend my daughter's interests. Well, my son-in-law is a wretch; he ill-treats his wife, he scandalizes the whole town and mixes himself up in all sorts of dirty affairs. You will see that he will also compromise himself in political matters when the elections come on. The last time it was he who put himself at the head of all the riff raff of the suburbs. It will kill me, your reverence!"

"Monsieur Mouret would never allow anyone to make remarks upon his conduct to him," the Abbé ventured to say.

"But I can't abandon my daughter to such a man!" cried Madame Rougon. "I will not permit ourselves to be dishonored. Justice is not made to be cast to the dogs."

Trouche was swaying himself about. He took advantage of a momentary silence.

"Monsieur Mouret is mad!" he declared roundly.

The words seemed to fall with all the stunning weight of a blow from a club, and everyone looked at the speaker.

"I mean that he has a weak head," Trouche continued. "You've only got to look at his eyes. I can tell you that I don't feel particularly easy myself. There was a man in Besancon who adored his daughter, still he murdered her one night without knowing what he was doing."

"The master has been cracked for a long time past," said Rose.

"But this is frightful!" cried Madame Rougon. "Really I think you are right. The last time I saw him, he had a most extraordinary expression. He has never had very sharp wits. Ah! my poor dear, promise to confide everything to me. I shall not be able to sleep quietly after this. Listen to me now; at the first sign of extravagant conduct on your husband's part, don't hesitate any longer, and don't run any further risk—madmen must be placed in confinement!"

After this speech she went away. When Trouche was again alone with the Abbé Faujas, he sniggered with his unpleasant grin that exposed his black teeth to view.

"Our landlady will owe me a big taper," he said. "She will be able to kick about at nights as much as she likes."



The priest, with his face quite ashy and his eyes bent down to the ground, made no reply. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went off to read his breviary under the arbor at the bottom of the garden.

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## XVIII

On Sundays Mouret, like many of the other retired traders, used to go out and stroll about the town. It was on Sundays only that he now emerged from that state of lonely seclusion in which he buried himself, overcome with a sort of shame. His Sunday outing was gone through quite mechanically. In the morning he shaved himself, put on a clean shirt, and brushed his coat and hat; then, after breakfast, he found himself in the street, without quite knowing how he got there, walking along with short steps, with his hands behind his back and looking very sedate and neat.

As he was leaving his house one Sunday, he saw Rose talking with much animation to Monsieur Rastoil's cook on the pathway of the Rue Balande. The two servants dropped into silence when they caught sight of him. They looked at him with such a peculiar expression that he felt behind him to find out whether his handkerchief was hanging out of his pocket. When he reached the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, he turned his head round and looked back and saw them still standing in the same place. Rose was imitating the reeling of a drunken man, while the president's cook was laughing loudly.

"I am walking too quickly and they are making fun of me," Mouret thought.

Then he slackened his pace. As he passed through the

Rue de la Banne toward the market, the shop-keepers ran to their doors and followed him curiously with their eyes. As he went along, there was much excitement behind him, and the people clustered together in groups, and there was a great deal of talking mingled with laughs and grins.

"Did you notice how quickly he was walking?"

"Yes, indeed, when he wanted to stride across the gutter he almost jumped."

"It is said that they are all like that."

"I felt quite frightened. Why do they let him come out? It oughtn't to be allowed."

Mouret was beginning to feel timid and he dared not venture to turn round again. He experienced a vague uneasiness, though he could not feel quite sure that it was about himself that the people were all talking. He quickened his steps and began to swing his arms about with an easy motion. He regretted that he had put on his old over-coat, a hazel-colored one and no longer of a fashionable cut. When he reached the market-place, he hesitated for a moment, and then he strode boldly on into the midst of the green-grocers' stalls. The mere sight of him caused quite a commotion.

All the housewives of Plassans formed a line about his path, and the market-women stood by their stalls, with their hands on their hips, and stared hard at him. The people pushed each other to get a sight of him, and some of the women mounted on to the benches in the corn-market. Mouret still further quickened his steps and tried to disengage himself from the crowd, not yet being able to believe that it was he who was the cause of all this excitement.

"Well, anyone would think that his arms were wind-mill sails," said a peasant-woman who was selling fruit.

"He flies on like a shot; he nearly upset my stall," exclaimed another woman, a green-grocer.

"Stop him! stop him!" the millers cried facetiously.

Mouret, overcome by curiosity, halted altogether and craned himself up on the tips of his toes to see what was the matter. He imagined that someone had just been detected thieving. A loud burst of laughter broke out from the crowd, and there were shouts and hisses and all sorts of calls and cries.

"There's no harm in him; don't hurt him."

"Ah! I'm not so sure of that. I shouldn't like to trust myself too near him. He gets up in the night and strangles people."

"He certainly looks a bad one."

"Has it come upon him quite suddenly?"

"Yes, indeed, all at once. And he used to be so kind and gentle! I'm going away; all this distresses me. Here are the three sous for the turnips."

Mouret had just recognized Olympe in the midst of a group of women. She had bought some magnificent peaches which she was carrying in a very fashionable-looking hand-bag. She had evidently been relating some very moving story, for all the gossips who were surrounding her were breaking out into smothered exclamations as they clasped their hands with expressions of pity.

"Then," she was saying, "he seized her by the hair, and he would have cut her throat with a razor that was lying on the chest of drawers if we hadn't arrived just in time to prevent the murder. Don't say anything to her about it: it would only bring her more trouble."

"What trouble?" demanded Mouret in amazement of Olympe.

The women hurried away, and Olympe assumed an expression of careful watchfulness for her own safety as she warily slipped off, saying:



"Don't excite yourself, Monsieur Mouret. You had better go back home."

Mouret took refuge in a little lane that led to the Cours Sauvaire. The shouts and cries increased in violence and for a few moments he was pursued by the angry uproar of the market-people.

"What is the matter with them to-day?" he wondered to himself. "Could it be I they were jeering at? But I never heard my name mentioned. Something out of the common must have happened."

Then he took off his hat and examined it, imagining that perhaps some street lad had thrown a handful of mud at it. It was perfectly right, however, and there was nothing fastened onto his coat-tails. This examination soothed him a little, and he resumed his sedate walk through the silent lane, and turned tranquilly into the Cours Sauvaire.

The usual group of friends were sitting on the benches in the sun.

"Hallo! there's Mouret!" cried the retired captain with an expression of great astonishment.

The liveliest curiosity manifested itself in the sleepy faces of the group. They stretched out their heads, without rising from their seats, leaving Mouret to stand in front of them. He examined them minutely from head to foot.

"Ah! you are taking a little stroll?" said the captain who seemed the boldest.

"Yes, just a short stroll," replied Mouret, in a listless fashion. "It's a very fine day."

The company exchanged meaning smiles. They were feeling chilly and the sky had just become overcast.

"Very fine," said the retired tanner; "you are easily pleased. It is true, however, that you are already wearing

winter clothes. What a funny overcoat that is you've got."

The smiles now grew into grins and titters. A sudden idea seemed to strike Mouret.

"Just look and tell me," he said, suddenly turning himself round, "if I have got a sun on my back."

The retired almond-dealers could no longer keep themselves serious and they burst into laughter. The captain, who was the joker of the company, winked his eyes.

"A sun?" he asked, "where? I can only see a moon."

The others shook with laughter. They thought the captain excessively witty.

"A moon?" said Mouret; "be kind enough to remove it. It has caused me much inconvenience."

The captain gave him three or four taps on the back and then he said:

"There, you are rid of it now. It must, indeed, be extremely inconvenient to have a moon on one's back. You are not looking very well."

"I am not very well," Mouret replied in his listless indifferent voice.

Then, imagining that he heard a titter, he added:

"But I am very well taken care of at home. My wife is very kind and attentive, and she quite spoils me. But I am in need of rest, and that is the reason why I don't come out now like I used to do, and am not seen about so much. When I am better, I shall look after business again."

"But," interrupted the retired master-tanner bluntly, "they say it is your wife who is not very well."

"My wife! There is nothing the matter with her! It is a pack of falsehoods! There is nothing the matter with her, nothing at all. People say things against us because we keep ourselves quietly at home. Ill, indeed!

my wife! She is very strong and never even has so much the matter with her as a headache."

He went on speaking in short sentences, stammering and hesitating with the uneasy look of a man who is telling falsehoods and the embarrassment of a whilom gossip who has become tongue-tied. The retired traders shook their heads with pitying expressions and the captain tapped his forehead with his finger. A former hatter of the suburbs who had scrutinized Mouret from his cravat to the bottom button of his overcoat was now absorbed in the examination of his boots. The lace of the one on the left foot had come undone, and this seemed to the hatter a most extraordinary matter. He nudged his neighbors' elbows and winked as he called their attention to the loosened lace. Soon all the bench had eyes for nothing else but the lace. It was the last proof. The men shrugged their shoulders in a way that seemed to say that they had now lost their last spark of hope.

"Mouret," said the captain, in paternal tones, "fasten up your boot-lace."

Mouret glanced at his feet, but he did not seem to understand, and he went on talking. Then, as no one replied to him, he became silent, and after standing there for a moment or two longer, he quietly continued his walk.

"He will fall, I'm sure," exclaimed the master-tanner, who had risen from his seat that he might keep Mouret longer in view.

When Mouret got to the end of the Cours Sauvaire, and passed in front of the Young Men's Club, he was again greeted with the smothered laughs which had followed him since he reached the street. He could distinctly see Séverin Rastoil, who was standing at the door of the club, pointing him out to a group of young men.



Clearly, he thought, it was himself who was thus providing sport for the town. He bent his head down and was seized with a kind of fear, which he could not explain to himself, as he stepped hastily along past the houses. Just as he was about to turn into the Rue Canquoin, he heard a noise behind him, and, turning his head, he saw three lads following him; two of them were big, impudent-looking lads, while the third was a very small one, with a serious face, and he was holding in his hand a dirty orange which he had picked up out of the gutter. Mouret made his way along the Rue Canquoin, and then, crossing over the Place des Récollets, he arrived in the Rue de la Banne. The lads were still following him.

"Do you want your ears pulled?" he called out, suddenly stepping up to them.

They dashed on one side, shouting and laughing, and made their escape from him, hopping away on their hands and knees. Mouret turned very red, and felt that he was an object of ridicule. He felt a perfect fear of crossing the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, and passing in front of the Rougons' windows with this following of street-arabs which he could hear increasing in numbers and boldness behind him. As he went along, he was obliged to go out of his way to avoid his mother-in-law, who was returning from vespers with Madame de Condamin.

"Wolf! wolf!" cried the lads.

Mouret, with the perspiration breaking out on his brow and his feet stumbling against the flags, overheard old Madame Rougon say to the wife of the conservator of rivers and forests:

"See! there he is, the scoundrel! It is disgraceful; and we can't tolerate it much longer."

Then Mouret could no longer restrain himself from

setting off at a run. With swinging arms and a look of distraction upon his face, he rushed into the Rue Balande with about ten or a dozen street-arabs dashing after him. It seemed to him as though all the shop-keepers of the Rue de la Banne, and the market-women, and the promenaders in the Cours, the young men from the club, the Rougons, the Condamins, all Plassans, in fact, were surging onward behind his back, breaking out into laughs and jeers, as he sped up the steep slope of the street. The lads stamped their feet and slid along the pavement, and made as much row in the usually quiet neighborhood as an escaped pack of hounds.

"Catch him!" they screamed.

"Did you ever see such a scare-crow as he looks in that overcoat of his?"

"Some of you go round by the Rue Taravelle and then you'll nab him?!"

"Cut along! cut along as hard as you can go!"

Mouret, now quite frantic, made a desperate rush toward his door, but his foot slipped and he tumbled down onto the pathway, where he lay for a few moments, quite overcome and motionless. The lads, afraid lest he should kick out at them, formed a circle round him and shrieked out screams of triumph, while the smallest of them stepping gravely forward, threw the rotten orange at Mouret, and it flattened itself against his left eye. Then the poor man got up with pain and difficulty, and went in at his own door without attempting to wipe himself. Rose was forced to come out with a broom and drive the young ragamuffins away.

From this Sunday, all Plassans was quite convinced that Mouret was a lunatic who ought to be placed under restraint. The most surprising statements were made in support of this belief. It was said, for instance, that he shut himself up for days together in a perfectly empty

room which had not been touched with a broom for a whole year; and those who circulated this story vouched for its truth, as they had it, they said, from Mouret's own cook. The accounts differed as to what he did in this empty room. The cook said that he pretended to be dead, a statement which thrilled the whole neighborhood with horror. The market-people firmly believed that he kept a coffin concealed in the room, and that he laid himself down at full length in it, with his eyes open and his hands upon his breast, and that he remained like that from morning till evening.

Madame Rougon now ostentatiously came up to the house every other day. She entered it with an expression of extreme uneasiness, and, as soon as the door was opened, she asked of Rose:

"Well! has anything happened to-day?"

Then, as soon as she caught sight of her daughter, she kissed her, and clasped her arms round her with a wild show of affection, as though she had been afraid that she would not find her alive. When Marthe told her that she was in no danger whatever, she looked at her with an expression of admiration, and exclaimed:

'You are a perfect angel! If I were not here to look after you, you would allow yourself to be murdered without muttering even a sigh. But make yourself easy; I am watching over you, and I am taking all precautions. The first time your husband raises his little finger against you, he will hear from me.'

She did not explain herself any further. The truth of the matter was that she had paid visits to every official in Plassans, and she had in this way confidentially related her daughter's troubles to the mayor, the sub-prefect, and the president of the tribunal, making them promise to observe an absolute secrecy about the matter.

"It is a mother in despair who is addressing herself to



you," she said with tears in her eyes. "I am giving into your keeping the honor and reputation of my poor child. My husband would take to his bed if there were to be a public scandal, but I can't wait till there is some fatal catastrophe. Advise me, and tell me what I ought to do."

The officials showed her the greatest sympathy and kindness. They did their best to reassure her, and they promised to keep a careful watch over Madame Mouret without in any way letting it be known, and, at the slightest sign of danger, to take some active step.

This story of a lunatic in his senses, who waited till the stroke of midnight to become mad, gave an exciting interest to the meetings of the two parties of guests in the Mourets' garden. They showed great alacrity in going to greet the Abbé Faujas. The priest came down stairs at four o'clock, and proceeded to do the honors of the arbor with much friendliness and urbanity, but he persisted in keeping himself in the background, and did little more than nod his head in answer to what was said to him. For the first few days, only indirect allusions were made to the drama which was being enacted in the house, but one Tuesday, Monsieur Maffre, who was gazing at the front of it with an uneasy expression, fixing his eyes upon one of the windows of the first floor, ventured to ask:

"That is the room, isn't it?"

Then the two parties began, in low tones, to discuss the strange story which was exciting the neighborhood. The priest made some vague remarks: it was very sad, and much to be regretted, he said, and then he pitied everybody without venturing anything more explicit.

"But you, doctor," asked Madame de Condamin of Doctor Porquier, 'you who are the family doctor, what do you think about it all?"

Doctor Porquier shook his head for some time before making any reply, and affected a discreet reserve.

"It is a very delicate matter," he said at last. "Madame Mouret is not in robust health, and as for Monsieur Mouret—"

"I have seen Madame Rougon," said the sub-prefect. "She is very uneasy."

"Her son-in-law has always been obnoxious to her," Monsieur de Condamin exclaimed bluntly. "I met Mouret myself at the club the other day, and he gave me a beating at piquet. He seemed to me to be as sensible as ever he was. The good man was never a Solomon."

"I have not said that he was mad, in the common interpretation of the word," said the doctor, thinking that he was being attacked; "but I merely say that I do not think it is prudent to allow him to be any longer at large."

This statement of the doctor caused considerable excitement, and Monsieur Rastoil glanced instinctively at the wall which separated the two gardens. Every face was turned toward the doctor.

"I once knew," he continued, "a charming lady, who kept up a large establishment, giving dinner-parties, and receiving at her house the most distinguished members of society, and who showed much sense and wit in her conversation. Well, when that lady retired to her bedroom, she locked herself in, and spent a part of the night in crawling round the room on her hands and knees, barking like a dog. The people in the house for a long time imagined that she really had a dog in the room with her. This lady was an example of what we doctors call lucid madness."

The Abbé Surin's face was wreathed with twinkling smiles as he glanced at Monsieur Rastoil's daughters,

who appeared much amused by this story of a fashionable lady turning herself into a dog.

"I once had," said the Abbé Bourrette, "a very strange penitent. She had a mania for killing flies, and she never could see one without feeling an irresistible desire to capture it. She used to keep them at home strung upon knitting needles. When she came to confess, she would weep bitterly and accuse herself of the deaths of the poor creatures and believe that she was damned. I could never correct her of the habit."

This story of the Abbé was very well received, and even Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies and Monsieur Rastail themselves condescended to smile.

"There is no great harm done," said the doctor, "so long as one confines oneself to killing flies. But the conduct of all lucid madmen is not so innocent as that. Some of them torture their families by some concealed vice, which has reached the degree of a mania; there are other wretched ones who drink and give themselves up to secret debauchery, who steal because they can't help stealing, and who are mad with pride or jealousy or ambition. They are able to control themselves in public, and to carry out the most complicated schemes and projects, and to converse rationally and without giving any one any reason to suspect their mental weakness, but as soon as they get back to their own private life and are alone with their victims, they abandon themselves to their delirious ideas and become brutal savages. If they don't murder straight out, they do it gradually."

"Well, now what about Monsieur Mouret?" asked Madame de Condamin.

"Monsieur Mouret has always been a worrying, restless, despotic sort of man. His cerebral derangement has increased with his years. I should not hesitate now to class him amongst dangerous madmen. I had a



patient who used to shut herself up, just as he does, in an unoccupied room, and spend the whole day in contriving the most abominable actions."

"But, doctor, if that is your opinion, you ought to proffer your advice," exclaimed Monsieur Rastoil, "you ought to warn those who are concerned."

Doctor Porquier seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Well, we will see about it," he said, smiling again with his fashionable doctor's smile. "If it should be necessary and matters become serious, I will do my duty."

The Abbé Faujas had been listening with curiosity though he had taken no part in the conversation. Then when there was a temporary silence, he remarked that their talk about mad people had a depressing effect upon the ladies and suggested that the subject should be changed. Their curiosity was awakened, and the two sets of guests now began to keep a sharp watch upon Mouret's behavior. The latter now only came out into the garden for an hour a day, while the Faujases remained sitting at table with his wife. Directly he appeared there, he came under the active surveillance of the Rastoils and the frequenters of the Sub-Prefecture. He could not stand for a moment in front of a bed of vegetables or examine a plant or even make a gesture of any sort without exciting, in the two gardens on his right and left, the most unfavorable comments. Everyone was turning against him. Monsieur de Condamin was the only one who still defended him. One day the fair Octavie said to him as they were at luncheon:

"What difference can it make to you whether Mouret is had or not?"

"To me, my dear? Absolutely none," he said in astonishment.

"Very well, then, allow that he is mad, since everyone

says he is. I don't know why you are so persistent in holding a contrary opinion to your wife's. It won't prove to your advantage, my dear. Have the intelligence, at Plassans, not to be too intelligent."

Monsieur de Condamin smiled.

"You are right, my dear, as you always are," he said gallantly; "you know that I have put my fortune in your hands—Don't wait dinner for me. I am going to ride to Saint-Eutrope to have a look at some timber they are felling."

Then he left the room, biting the end off a cigar.

Madame de Condamin was well aware that he had a fancy for a young girl in the neighborhood of Saint-Eutrope; but she was very tolerant and she had even saved him twice from the consequences of scandalous intrigues. On his side, he felt very easy about his wife's virtue; he knew that she was much too prudent to indulge in any love affair in Plassans.

"You would never guess how Mouret spends his time in that room where he shuts himself up!" the conservator of rivers and forests said the next morning when he called in at the Sub-Prefecture. "He is counting all the s's in the Bible. He is afraid of making any mistake about the matter, and he has already commenced counting them for the third time. Ah! you were quite right; he is cracked from top to bottom!"

One afternoon, Aurélie, the elder of Monsieur Rastoul's two daughters, related with a blushing face how the previous night, having gone to look out of her window about midnight, she had seen their neighbor promenading about his garden, carrying a big candle. Monsieur de Condamin thought the girl was making fun of him, but she gave the most minute details.

"He held the candle in his left hand; and he knelt

down on the ground and dragged himself along on his knees, sobbing as he did so."

"Can it be possible that he has committed a murder and has buried the body of his victim in his garden?" said Monsieur Maffre, who had turned quite pale.

Then the two sets of guests agreed to watch some night, till midnight if it were necessary, to try and clear the matter up. The following night they kept on the alert in the two gardens, but Mouret did not appear. Three nights were wasted in the same way. The Sub-Prefecture party were going to abandon the watch, and Madame de Condamin declined to stay out any longer under the chestnut-trees where it was so dreadfully dark, when a light was seen flickering through the inky darkness of the fourth night on the ground-floor of the Mourets' house. When Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies' attention was drawn to this, he slipped out into the Chevillottes alley to go and invite the Rastoils to come onto his terrace which overlooked the neighboring garden. The president, who was on the watch with his daughters behind the cascade, hesitated for a moment, reflecting whether he might not compromise himself politically by going in this way to the sub-prefect's, but as the night was very dark and his daughter Aurélie was most anxious to have the truth of her report manifested, he followed Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies with stealthy steps through the darkness. It was in this manner that a representative of Legitimacy at Plassans for the first time entered the grounds of a Bonapartist official.

"Don't make a noise," whispered the sub-prefect. "Lean over the terrace."

There Monsieur Rastoil and his daughters found Doctor Porquier and Madame de Condamin and her husband.

The darkness was so dense that they exchanged salutations without being able to see one another. Then they



all held their breath. Mouret had just appeared upon the steps, holding a candle stuck in a great kitchen candle-stick.

"You see he has got a candle," whispered Aurélie.

No one dissented. The fact was quite incontrovertible; Mouret certainly was carrying a candle. He came slowly down the steps, turned to the left and then stood motionless before a bed of lettuces. He then raised his candle to throw a light upon the plants. His face looked yellow against the black background of the night.

"What a dreadful face!" exclaimed Madame Condamin. "I shall dream of it, I'm certain. Is he asleep, doctor?"

"No, no; replied Doctor Porquier, "he is not a somnambulist; he is wide awake. Do you notice how fixed his gaze is? Observe, too, the abruptness of his movements—"

"Hush! hush!" interrupted Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies; "we don't require a lecture just now."

Then there was the most complete silence. Mouret had stridden over the box edging and was kneeling down in the midst of the lettuces. He held his candle down, and he began to search along the trenches underneath the spreading leaves of the plants. Every now and then he made a slight exclamation and he seemed to be crushing something and stamping it into the ground. This went on for nearly half an hour.

"He is crying; it is just as I told you," said Aurélie complacently.

"It is really very terrifying," Madame de Condamin exclaimed nervously. "Let us go back into the house, I beg."

Mouret dropped his candle and it went out. They could hear him uttering exclamations of annoyance as he went back up the steps, stumbling against them in the

dark. The Rastoil girls broke out into slight cries of terror, and they did not quite recover from their fright till they got back to the brightly lighted little drawing-room, where Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies insisted upon the company refreshing themselves with some tea and biscuits. Madame de Condamin was still trembling with alarm, and she huddled herself up in the corner of a couch and said, with a touching smile, that she had never felt so overcome before, not even on the morning when she had had the reprehensible curiosity to go and see a criminal executed.

"It is strange," remarked Monsieur Rastoil, who had been buried in thought for a moment or two; "but Mouret had all the appearance of searching for slugs amongst his lettuces. The gardens are quite destroyed with them, and I have been told that they can only be satisfactorily exterminated in the night-time."

"Slugs, indeed!" cried Monsieur de Condamin. "Do you suppose he troubles himself about slugs? Do people go hunting for slugs with a candle? No; I agree with Monsieur Maffre in thinking that there is some crime at the bottom of the matter. Has this Mouret ever had a servant who disappeared mysteriously? There ought to be an inquiry made."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies thought that his friend the conservator of river and forests was theorizing a little further than the facts warranted. He took a sip at his tea and said:

"No, no; my dear sir. He is mad and has extraordinary fancies, but that is all. It is quite bad enough as it is."

He took the plate of biscuits and handed it to Monsieur Rastoil's daughter with a gallant bow and then putting it down again he continued:

"And to think this wretched man has mixed himself

up in politics! I don't want to insinuate anything against your alliance with the Republicans, my dear president; but you must allow that in him the Marquis de Lagrifoul had a very peculiar supporter."

Monsieur Rastoil had become very grave. He merely made a vague gesture, without saying anything.

"And he still busies himself with these matters. It is politics, perhaps, which are turning his brain," said the fair Octavie, as she delicately wiped her lips. "They say he takes the greatest interest in the approaching elections, don't they, my dear?"

She addressed this question to her husband, casting a glance at him as she spoke.

"He is quite bursting over it!" cried Monsieur de Condamin. "He declares that he can entirely control the election, and that he can have a shoemaker returned if he chooses."

"You are exaggerating," said Dr. Porquier. "He has no longer the influence he used to have; the whole town jeers at him."

"Ah! you are mistaken! If he chooses, he can lead to the poll the whole of the old quarter of the town and a great number of villages. He is mad, it is true, but that is a recommendation. I myself consider him still a very sensible person, for a Republican." This very moderate attempt at wit met with a distinct success. Monsieur Rastoil's daughters broke out into their school-girl laughs and the president himself nodded his head in approbation. He threw off his serious expression, and, avoiding looking at the sub-prefect, he said:

"Lagrifoul has perhaps not rendered us the services we had a right to expect, but a shoemaker would be really too disgraceful for Plassans!"

Then, as though he wanted to prevent any further remarks on the subject, he added quickly: "It is half-past



one; it is quite an orgie we are having, my dear sub-prefect, we are all very much obliged to you."

Madame de Condamin, as she wrapped her shawl round her shoulders, contrived to have the last word.

"Well," she said, "we really must not let the election be controlled by a man who goes and kneels down in the middle of a bed of lettuces after twelve o'clock at night."

This night became quite historical, and Monsieur de Condamin derived much amusement from relating the details of what had occurred to Monsieur de Bourdeu and Monsieur Maffre and the priests who had not seen Mouret with his candle. Three days later all the neighborhood was asserting that the madman who beat his wife had been seen walking about with his head enveloped in a sheet. The afternoon assemblies under the arbor were much exercised by the possible candidature of Mouret's shoemaker. They laughed as they studied each other's expression. It was a sort of political pulse-feeling. Certain confidences of his friend, the president, induced Monseieur de Bourdeu to believe that a tacit understanding might be arrived at between the Sub-Prefecture and the moderate opposition, to promote the candidature of himself and inflict a crushing defeat upon the Republicans. Possessed with this idea he became more and more sarcastic against the marquis and made the most of all his blunders in the Chamber; Monsieur Delangre, who only came at long intervals, alleging the cares of his municipal administration as an excuse for his infrequent appearance, smiled softly at each fresh sally of the ex-prefect.

"You've only got to bury the marquis now, your reverence," he said one day in the Abbé Faujas' ear.

Madame de Condamin, who heard him, turned her

head and laid her finger upon her lips with a pretty look of mischief.

The Abbé Faujas now allowed politics to be mentioned in his presence. He even occasionally expressed an opinion in favor of a union of all honest and religious men. Then all present, Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, Monsieur Rastoil, Monsieur de Bourdeu, and even Monsieur Maffre, grew quite warm in their expressions of desire for such an agreement. Sometimes Mouret's name was mentioned, and Monsieur de Condamin said once:

"I never let my wife come here without feeling uneasy. I am really quite alarmed. You will see some strange things happen at the next elections if he is still at liberty."

Trouche did his best every morning to frighten the Abbé Faujas during the interview which he regularly had with him. He told him the most alarming stories. The working-men of the old quarter of the town, he said, were showing too great an interest in Mouret, and they talked of coming to see him and judging of his condition for themselves and taking his advice.

The priest usually merely shrugged his shoulders. One day, however, Trouche left him looking quite delighted. He went off to Olympe and kissed her, exclaiming:

"This time, my dear, I have managed it!"

"Has he given you leave?" she asked.

"Yes, full leave. We shall be delightfully comfortable when we have got rid of the old man."

Olympe was still in bed. She dived down under the bedclothes, and wriggled about delightedly and laughed gleefully.

"We shall have everything to do as we like with, shan't we? I shall take another bedroom, and I shall

go out into the garden, and I shall do my cooking down stairs in the kitchen. My brother will have to let us do all that. You must have managed to frighten him very much."

It was not till about ten o'clock that evening that Trouche made his appearance at the low café where he was accustomed to meet Guillaume Porquier and other wild young men. They joked him about his lateness and playfully accused him of having been out of the ramparts with one of the girls of the Home of the Virgin. Pleasantry of this kind generally pleased him, but tonight he remained very grave. He said that he had been engaged with business, very serious business. It was not till toward midnight, when he had emptied the decanters on the counter, that he became more unreserved and expansive. Then he began to talk stammeringly and familiarly to Guillaume, leaning his back against the wall, and lighting his pipe afresh between every two sentences.

"I have seen your father this evening. He is a very good fellow. I wanted a paper from him. He was very kind, very kind indeed. He gave it to me. I have it here in my pocket. He didn't want to give it to me at first, though. He said it was only the family's business. I said to him, 'I am the family; I have got the wife's orders.' You know her, don't you; a dear little woman. She seemed quite pleased when I went to talk the matter over with her beforehand. Then he gave me the paper. You can feel it here in my pocket."

Guillaume looked at him keenly, concealing his extreme curiosity under an incredulous laugh.

"I'm telling you the truth," the intoxicated man continued. "The paper is here in my pocket. Can't you feel it?"

"Oh! it's a newspaper!" said Guillaume.



Then Trouche sniggered and drew out a large envelope from the pocket of his overcoat and laid it upon the table in the midst of the cups and glasses. For a moment he prevented Guillaume, who had reached out his hand toward it, from taking it up, but then he allowed him to have it, laughing loudly as though some one were tickling him. The paper was a minutely detailed statement by Doctor Porquier on the mental condition of Francois Mouret, householder, of Plassans.

"Are they going to shut him up, then?" asked Guillaume, handing back the paper.

"That's no business of yours, my boy," replied Trouche, who had now become distrustful again. "This paper here is for his wife. I am merely a friend who is glad to be able to do a service. She will act as she pleases. She can't go on any longer allowing herself to be half-murdered, poor lady."

By the time they were turned out of the café, he was so drunk that Guillaume had to accompany him to the Rue Balande. He wanted to lie down and go to sleep on every seat in the Cours Sauvaire. When they reached the Place of the Sub-Prefecture, he began to cry as he said:

"I have no friends now; every one despises me just because I am poor. But you are a good-hearted young fellow, and you shall come and have coffee with us when we get into possession. If the Abbé interferes with us, we will send him to keep the other one company. He isn't very sharp, the Abbé, in spite of his grand airs. I can persuade him into believing anything. But you are a real friend, aren't you? Mouret is done for; we will drink his wine together."

When Guillaume had seen Trouche to his door, he walked through the sleeping town and went and whistled softly before the magistrate's house. It was a signal

he was making. The young Maffres, whom their father locked up with his own hand in their bedroom, opened a window on the first-floor and descended to the ground by the aid of the bars with which the ground-floor windows were protected. Every night they thus went off to the haunts of vice in the company of Guillaume Porquier.

"Well," he said to them, after they had reached in silence the dark paths of the ramparts, "we needn't trouble ourselves, now. If my father talks any more about sending me off to some hole of a place, I shall have something to say to him. Will you bet that I can't have myself elected into the Young Men's Club whenever I like?"

The young Maffres took the bet, and then they all three glided into a yellow house with green shutters that was built in an angle of the ramparts at the end of a blind alley.

The following night Marthe was in a dreadful state. She had been present in the morning at a long religious ceremony, the whole of which Olympe had insisted upon seeing. When Rose and the lodgers ran into the room upon hearing her piercing screams, they found her lying at the foot of the bed with the skin of her forehead gashed open. Mouret was kneeling in the midst of the bedclothes, trembling all over.

"He has killed her this time!" cried the cook.

She seized Mouret in her arms, although he was in his night-shirt, and pushed him out of the room and into his office, the door of which was on the other side of the landing; and then she went back to get a mattress and some blankets which she threw to him. Trouche had set off running to find Doctor Porquier. When the doctor arrived he dressed Marthe's wound. If the cut had been a trifle lower down, he said, it would have been

fatal. Downstairs in the lobby, he declared in the presence of them all that it was necessary to take some active steps, and that Madame Mouret's life could no longer be left at the mercy of a violent madman.

The next morning Marthe was obliged to keep her bed. She was still slightly delirious, and she fancied that she saw an iron hand driving a flaming sword into her skull. Rose absolutely declined to allow Mouret to enter the room. She served him his lunch on a dusty table in his own office. He ate nothing and he was gazing at his plate with a look of stupefaction when Rose ushered into the room three men dressed in black.

"Are you the doctors?" he asked. "How is she getting on?"

"She is better than she was," replied one of the men.

Mouret began to cut his bread mechanically as though he was going to eat it.

"I wish the children were here," he said. "They would look after her and we should be more lively. It is since the children went away that she has been ill. I am no longer good for anything."

He raised a piece of bread to his mouth, and heavy tears trickled down his face. The man who had already spoken now said to him, casting at the same time a glance at his two companions:

"Shall we go and fetch your children?"

"I should like it very much," replied Mouret, rising from his seat. "Let us start at once."

As he went downstairs he saw no one except Trouche and his wife, who were leaning over the balustrade on the second floor, following each step he took downstairs with their gleaming eyes. Olympe hurried down quickly behind him and rushed into the kitchen where Rose, in a state of great emotion, was watching out of the window. When a carriage, which was waiting at the door, had



driven off with Mouret, she sprang up the staircase again, leaping up four steps at a time, and seizing Trouche by his shoulders, she made him dance round the landing in a paroxysm of delight.

"He's packed off!" she cried.

Marthe kept her bed for a week. When she was able to come downstairs again and took her place at the table in the dining-room, she began to manifest some astonishment, and asked uneasily where her husband was.

"Now, my dear lady, don't distress yourself," said Madame Faujas, "or you will make yourself ill again. It was absolutely necessary that something should be done, and your friends felt bound to consult together and take steps for your protection."

Marthe listened to these words with staring eyes and a deadly pale face. She had let her spoon fall from her hand, and she gazed out of the window in front of her as though the sight of some dreadful vision rising from behind the fruit-trees in the garden was filling her with terror.

"Les Tulettes! Les Tulettes!" she gasped out, as she buried her face in her trembling hands.

She fell backward and was fainting away from nervous excitement, when the Abbé Faujas, who had finished his soup, grasped her hands, pressed them tightly, and said in his softest tones:

"Show yourself strong before this trial which God is sending upon you. He will afford you consolation if you do not show yourself rebellious, and he will grant you the happiness you deserve."

Beneath the pressure of the priest's hands and the tender inflections of his words, Marthe revived and sat up again with brightly flushed cheeks.

"Oh, yes!" she cried, as she broke out into sobs, "I have great need of happiness; promise me great happiness."

## XIX

The general elections were to take place in October. About the middle of September, Monseigneur Rousselot suddenly set off to Paris, after having had a long interview with the Abbé Faujas. It was said that one of his sisters, who lived at Versailles, was seriously ill. Five days after, he was back in Plassans again, and he called the Abbé Surin into his study to read Greek to him.

"Good, very good," he said; "you express the music of that beautiful tongue excellently."

Then, glancing at the time-piece with an expression of uneasiness, he added:

"Has the Abbé Faujas been here yet this morning? Ah, my child, what a dreadful time I've had! My ears are still buzzing with the abominable uproar of the railway. It was raining the whole time I was in Paris."

The Abbé Surin laid down his book on the corner of a small table.

"Is your lordship satisfied with the results of your journey?" he asked, with the familiarity of a petted favorite.

"I have learned what I wanted to know," the bishop replied with his subtle smile. "I ought to have taken you with me. You would have learned a good many things that it would be useful for you to know at your age and destined as you are for the episcopate."

"I am listening, my lord," said the young priest with a beseeching expression.

But the prelate shook his head.

"No, no; these matters are not to be spoken of. Make a friend of the Abbé Faujas. He may be able to do

much for you some day. I have received full information about him." The Abbé Surin clasped his hands with such a wheedling look of curiosity that Monseigneur Rousselot went on to say:

"He had some bother of some sort at Besancon. Afterwards he was living in great poverty in furnished apartments in Paris. He went and offered himself. Just at that time the minister was on the look-out for priests devoted to the government. I was told that at first Faujas quite frightened him with his fierce looks and old cassock. It was purely by chance that he sent him here. The minister was most pleasant and courteous to me."

The bishop finished his sentences with a slight wave of his hand as he sought about for fitting words, and feared to say too much. But at last the affection which he felt for his secretary got the better of his caution and he continued with more animation:

"Take my advice and try to be useful to the vicar of Saint-Saturnin's. He will want all the assistance he can get, and he seems to me to be a man who will never forget either an injury or a kindness. But don't ally yourself with him. He will end badly. That is my impression."

"End badly?" exclaimed the young priest in surprise.

"Oh! just now he is in the full swing of triumph. It is his face which disquiets me, my child. He has a terrible face. That man will never die in his bed. Don't you do anything to compromise me. All I ask for is to be allowed to live tranquilly."

The Abbé Surin was just taking up his book again, when the Abbé Faujas was announced. Monseigneur Rousselot advanced to meet him with outstretched hands and a smiling face, addressing him as "my dear vicar."



"Leave us, my child," he said to his secretary, who thereupon retired.

He spoke of his journey. His sister was better than she had been, he said and he had been able to shake hands with some of his old friends.

"And did you see the minister?" asked the Abbé Faujas, fixing his eyes keenly upon him.

"Yes; I thought it was my duty to call upon him," replied the bishop, who felt that he was blushing. "He spoke to me very favorably indeed of you."

"Then you have no longer any doubts and you trust yourself to me absolutely?"

"Absolutely, my dear vicar. Besides, I know nothing about politics myself, and I leave everything in your hands."

They remained talking together the whole morning. The Abbé Faujas got the bishop to promise to make a perambulation through his diocese, and the priest said he would go with him and prompt him as to what he was to say. It would be necessary, as well, to summon all the rural deans so that the priests of the smallest villages might receive their instructions. There would be no difficulty in all this, for the clergy would act as they were told. The most delicate task would be in Plassans itself, in the district of Saint-Marc. The aristocrats, shutting themselves up in the privacy of their houses, were entirely beyond the reach of the priest's influence, and up till now he had only been able to work upon the ambitious royalists, such men as Rastoil and Maffre and Bourdeu. The bishop undertook to sound the feelings of certain drawing-rooms in the district of Saint-Marc where he visited. But even allowing that the aristocracy voted adversely, they would be in a ridiculous minority if they were deserted by those of the middle classes who were amenable to clerical influence.

"Now said Monseigneur Rousselot as he rose from his seat, "it would perhaps be as well if you told me the name of your candidate that I may recommend him in my letters."

The Abbé Faujas smiled.

"It is dangerous to mention names," he said. "There wouldn't be a scrap of our candidate left in a week's time, if we made his name known now. The Marquis de Lagrifoul has become quite out of the question. Monsieur de Bourdeu, who is counting upon being a candidate, is still more so. We shall leave them to destroy each other, and then, at the last moment, we shall come forward. Just say that an election on purely political ground would be much to be regretted, and that what is necessary for the interests of Plassans is that some man should be chosen who is not a party man, but one who has an intimate knowledge of the needs of the town and the department. And you may let it be understood that such a man has been found; but don't go any further."

The bishop now smiled in his turn. He detained the priest for a moment as he was about to take his leave.

"And the Abbé Fenil?" he said, lowering his voice. "Are you not afraid that he will do all he can to thwart your plans?"

The Abbé Faujas shrugged his shoulders.

"He has made no sign at all," he said.

"It is exactly that quietness of his that makes me uneasy," returned the prelate. "I know Fenil well. He is the most vindictive priest in my diocese. He may possibly have abandoned the ambition of beating you in the political arena, but you may be sure he will take a personal vengeance upon you. I have no doubt he is keeping a watch over you in his retirement."

"Pooh!" said the Abbé Faujas, showing his white teeth. "I'll take care he doesn't eat me up."

The Abbé Surin had just returned into the room, and when the vicar of Saint-Saturnin's had gone, he made the bishop laugh by exclaiming:

"If they could only eat each other up like a couple of foxes, and leave nothing but their tails!"

The electoral campaign was on the point of commencing. Plassans, which generally remained quite calm and unexcited by political questions, was beginning to get a little feverish and perturbed. An invisible mouth seemed to be breathing war through its quiet streets. The Marquis de Lagrifoul who lived at La Palud, a large straggling village in the neighborhood, had been on a visit for the last fortnight at the house of a relative of his, the Comte de Valqueyras, whose mansion was one of the largest in the district of St. Marc. He showed himself about the town, promenaded in the Cours Sauvaire, attended Saint-Saturnin's, and bowed to the influential towns-people, but without succeeding in throwing aside his haughty reserve. These attempts at being affable and popular, which had once been attended with success, now seemed to fail. Fresh charges and accusations were bandied about every day, originating from some unknown source. The marquis, it was asserted, was a miserably incompetent man. With any other representative than the marquis, Plassans would long ago have had a branch line of railway connecting it with Nice; and it was complained, too, that if any one from the district went to see the marquis in Paris, he had to call three or four times before he could obtain the slightest service. Though the candidature of the retiring deputy was much damaged by accusations of this kind, no other candidate had openly entered the lists. There was some talk of Monsieur de Bourdeu coming forward, though it was considered that it would be extremely difficult to obtain a majority in favor of this ex-prefect



of Louis-Philippe, who had no strong connection with the place. The prevailing feeling was one of general perplexity and confusion, mingled with weariness and a desire to get the election hurried over as quickly as possible.

In the excitement and restlessness which this doubtful state of opinion was causing in the town, the Republican party were anxious to run a candidate of their own. Their choice fell upon a master-hatter, one Maurin, a plain simple man, who was much beloved by the working-men. In the cafés, in the evenings, Trouche expressed an opinion that Maurin was too colorless and not sufficiently advanced in his views, and he proposed in his stead a wheelwright of Les Tuilettes, whose name had appeared in the list of the December proscripts, who, however, had the good sense to decline the nomination. It should be said that Trouche now gave himself out as an extreme Republican. He would have come forward himself, he said, if his wife's brother had not been a parson, but as he was, to his great regret, he declared, forced to eat the bread of the hypocrites, he felt bound to remain in the background. Trouche's greatest success was obtained by accusing the Sub-Prefecture party and the adherents of Monsieur Rastoil of having caused the disappearance of poor Mouret, with the view of depriving the democratic party of one of their worthiest chiefs. The gossips of the old quarter of the town spoke quite tenderly and feelingly about "the madman who beat his wife," now that he was shut up in confinement, and told each other that the Abbé Faujas had wanted to get an inconvenient husband out of his way. Trouche repeated his charge every evening, bringing down his fists upon the tables of the cafés with such an air of conviction that he succeeded in persuading his listeners of the truth of a story in which Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies played

the most extraordinary part imaginable. There was a complete reaction in Mouret's favor. He was considered a political victim, a man whose influence had been feared so much that he had been put out of the way in a cell at Les Tulettes."

"Just leave it all to me," Trouche said with a confidential air. "I will expose all these precious pious folks, and I will tell some fine stories about their Home of the Virgin. It's a nice place is the Home—a place where these ladies make their assignations!"

The Abbé Faujas almost seemed to have the power of multiplying himself. For some time past he was to be seen everywhere about the streets. He bestowed much attention upon his appearance, and was careful always to have a pleasant smile upon his face; though now and then his eyelids drooped for an instant and hid the stern fire of his glance. Old Madame Rougon, whom he continued to see in secret, was his good genius. She lectured him soundly, and kept his tall form bent before her on a low chair while she told him that he must strive to please, and that he would ruin everything if he let the iron hand appear from under the velvet glove.

"It is I who wear the cassock," she said sometimes, with a smile; "you carry yourself just like a gendarme, my dear vicar."

The priest showed himself especially assiduous in his attendance at the Young Men's Club. He listened with an indulgent air to the young men talking politics, and told them with a shake of his head, that honesty was all that was necessary. His popularity was still increasing. One evening he consented to play at billiards, and he showed himself extremely skillful at the game, and, when they were sitting in a quiet little party, he would even accept a cigarette. The club took his advice in every question that arose. His reputation for tolerance

was completely established by the kind, good-natured way in which he advocated the admission of Guillaume Porquier, who had renewed his application.

"I have seen the young man," he said; "he came to me to make a general confession, and I ended by giving him absolution. There is forgiveness for every sin. We must not treat him as a leper, just because he has pulled down a few sign-boards in Plassans, and has run into debt at Paris."

The Abbé Faujas did, indeed, seem to have an affection for the doctor's son. He said that this poor young man wanted guiding by a very gentle hand. In a short time Guillaume became the moving-spirit of the club. He invented amusements, showed them how to make punch with kirsch-wasser, and led the young fellows fresh from the college into all sorts of dissipation. His pleasant vices gave him an enormous influence. While the organ was pealing over the top of the billiard-room, he drank away, and gathered round him the sons of the most reputable people in Plassans, and made them almost choke with laughter at his broad stories. The members of the club now got into the way of indulging in doubtful topics of conversation in the corner of the rooms. The Abbé Faujas appeared quite unconscious of it.

Lucien Delangre remained the serious man of the club. He showed great deference to the Abbé Faujas, and he won the group of studious young men over to the priest's side. He frequently walked with him to the club, talking to him with much animation, but subsiding into silence as soon as they entered the general room.

On leaving the café which had been established beneath the Church of the Minimes, the Abbé used to go regularly to the Home of the Virgin. He arrived in the middle of the play-time, and made his appearance with a smiling face upon the steps of the play-ground. Then



all the young girls surrounded him, and disputed with each other for the possession of his pockets, in which were always to be found some sacred pictures or chaplets or medals that had been blessed. These big girls quite worshiped him as he tapped them gently on their cheeks and told them to be good, at which their bold faces broke out into sly smiles. The sisters often complained to him that the children confided to their care were quite unmanageable, and that they fought and tore each other's hair, and did even worse things than this. The Abbé, considering these offenses as mere peccadilloes, reproved the more turbulent girls in the chapel, from which they came out in a more submissive frame of mind. Occasionally he made some graver piece of misconduct a pretext for sending for the parents, whom he sent away again quite touched by his kindness and good-nature. The young scape-graces of the Home of the Virgin, in this way, gained him the hearts of the poor families of Plassans. When they went home in the evening, they told the most wonderful things about his reverence the vicar.

Trouche himself had tried to win over "the little dears," as he called the young girls; but the priest mistrusting his glistening eyes, had strictly forbidden him to set foot in the play-ground; and so he now confined himself to throwing sugar-plums to "the little dears," when the sisters' backs were turned, just as though he were throwing crumbs to so many sparrows.

The Abbé's day's work did not end at the Home of the Virgin. From thence he went to pay a series of short visits to the fashionable ladies of Plassans. Madame Rastoil and Madame Delangre welcomed him with expressions of delight, and repeated his slightest words, and provided themselves with topics for a whole week's conversation from his visit. But his great friend was Ma-

dame de Condamin. She maintained an air of easy familiarity toward him, the superiority of a beautiful woman who is conscious that she is all-powerful. She spoke occasional sentences in low tones, and accompanied them with meaning smiles and glances, which seemed to tell of some secret understanding between them. When the priest came to see her, she dismissed her husband with a look. "The government was going to hold a cabinet council," the conservator of rivers and forests said playfully, as he philosophically went off to mount his horse. It was Madame Rougon who had brought Madame de Condamin to the priest's notice.

"She has not yet absolutely established her position here," Madame Rougon explained to the Abbé Faujas. "There is a great deal of cleverness under those pretty coquettish airs of hers. She will be of great use to you if you should find it necessary to give away places or crosses. She has retained an influential friend in Paris, who sends her as many red ribbons as she asks for."

As Madame Rougon kept herself aloof from reasons of deep diplomacy, the fair Octavie had thus become the Abbé Faujas' most active ally. She won over to his side her friends and her friends' friends. She set off into the country every morning and exerted an astonishing amount of influence merely by the pleasant little waves of her delicately gloved fingers. She had especial success with the towns-women, and she increased tenfold that feminine influence of which the priest had felt the absolute necessity as soon as ever he had begun to go about in the narrow world of Plassans. She succeeded, too, in closing the mouths of the Paloques, who were growing very rabid about the state of affairs at the Mourets', by throwing a honeyed cake to the two monsters.

"Ah! do you still bear us a grudge, my dear lady?" she said one day, as she met the judge's wife. "It is

very wrong of you. Your friends have not forgotten you; they are thinking about you and are preparing a surprise for you."

"A fine surprise, I'll be bound!" cried Madame Paloque bitterly. "No, we are not going to allow ourselves to be laughed at again, and I have firmly made up my mind to keep myself to my own affairs."

Madame de Condamin smiled.

"What would you say," she asked, "if Monsieur Paloque were to be decorated?"

The judge's wife stared in silence. A rush of blood to her face turned it quite blue, and made her terrible to behold.

"You are joking," she stammered. "This is only another sally against us—if it isn't true, I'll never forgive you."

The fair Octavie swore that she had spoken nothing but the truth. The distinction would certainly be conferred upon him, but it would not be officially notified in the "Moniteur" until after the elections, as the government did not want to appear to be buying the support of the magistracy. She also hinted that the Abbé Faujas was not unconcerned in the bestowal of this long-desired reward, and said that he had talked about it to the sub-prefect.

"My husband was right, then," exclaimed Madame Paloque, in great surprise. "For a long time past he has been worrying me dreadfully to go and apologize to the Abbé. But I am very obstinate, and I would have let myself be killed sooner. But since the Abbé makes the first move—well, we ask for nothing more than to live at peace with everyone."

The next day the Palokes were very humble, Madame Paloque accused the Abbé Fenil of the blackest conduct, and with consummate impudence she related how she



had gone to see him one day, and how he had spoken in her presence of turning "the whole of the Abbé Faujas' clique," neck-and-crop out of Plassans.

"If you like, she said to the priest, taking him aside, "I will give you a note written at the vicar-general's dictation. It concerns you. He tried, I believe, to get several discreditable stories inserted in the Plassans Gazette."

"How did this note come into your hands?" asked the Abbé.

"Well, it's sufficient that it is there," she replied, without any sign of embarrassment.

Then, with a smile, she continued:

"I found it. I recollect, by the way, that there are two or three words written over an erasure in the vicar-general's own hand. I trust to your honor in all this, may I not? We are upright, honest people, and we don't want to compromise ourselves."

She pretended to be affected by scruples for three days before bringing him the note; and Madame de Condamin was obliged to assure her privately that an application to have Monsieur Rastoil pensioned off would shortly be made, so that her husband could succeed to the vacant presidency. Then she gave up the paper. The Abbé Faujas did not wish to keep it himself and he took it to Madame Rougon, and he charged her to make use of it, keeping herself, however, strictly in the background, if the vicar-general showed the slightest sign of interfering in the elections.

Madame de Condamin also dropped a hint to Monsieur Maffre that the Emperor was thinking about decorating him, and she made a formal promise to Doctor Porquier to find a suitable place for his good-for-nothing son. She showed the most obliging kindness in the friendly afternoon meetings in the gardens. It was really under

the Mourets' arbor that the election was decided.

"Well, my dear sub-prefect," said the Abbé Faujas one day with a smile, as the two sets of guests were mingling together, "the great battle is drawing near." They had now arrived at discussing the political struggle in a quiet and friendly way. In the gardens at the back of the houses they grasped each other's hands, while in front of them they still continued to keep up the appearance of hostility. Madame de Condamin cast a quick glance at Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who bent forward with his habitual elegance and said all in a breath:

"I shall remain in my tent, your reverence. I have been fortunate enough to make his excellency understand that it is the duty of the government, in the immediate interest of Plassans, to hold itself aloof. There will not be any official candidate."

Monsieur de Bourdeu turned pale. His eyelids quivered and his hands trembled with joy.

"There won't be any official candidate?" cried Monsieur Rastoil, greatly moved by this unexpected news, and breaking out of the reserve which he generally maintained.

"No," replied Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, "the town contains a sufficiently great number of honorable men and is developed enough to make its own choice of a representative."

He bowed slightly toward Monsieur de Bourdeu, who rose from his seat, and stammered out:

'Undoubtedly, undoubtedly.'

"Bourdeu has a chance now," said Monsieur Rastoil, taking the Abbé Faujas aside. "It is very annoying. I can't tell him so, but we shall not vote for him; he has compromised himself too much as an Orleanist."

"If Monsieur de Bourdeu persists in his candidature,"

rejoined the Abbé Faujas, "the Republicans will poll an imposing minority, which will have a very bad effect."

The Abbé drew the President aside to the end of the arbor, where he continued the conversation in subdued tones. As they slowly strolled back again, Monsieur Rastoil was saying:

"You are quite right. He would be a very suitable candidate. He belongs to no party, and we could all unite to support him. I am no fonder of the Empire than you are, but it would be childish going on sending deputies to the Chamber with no other purpose than to obstruct and rail at the government. Plassans is suffering from such tactics. What we want is a man with a good head for business—a local man who can look after the interests of the place."

"Your success is certain, my dear sir," the conservator of rivers and forests was saying to Monsieur de Bourdeu. "But be careful what you do when you get to Paris. I hear from a very trustworthy source that the government has resolved upon taking strong measures if the opposition shows itself too provoking."

The ex-prefect looked at him very uneasily, wondering to himself if he was making fun of him. Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies merely smiled, as he stroked his mustaches. Then the conversation became general again, and Monsieur de Bourdeu thought he could detect that everyone was congratulating him upon his approaching triumph with a discretion that was full of tact. He enjoyed the sweets of an hour's delightful popularity.

"It is surprising how much more quickly the grapes ripen in the sun," remarked the Abbé Bourrette, who had never moved from his chair, with his eyes raised up to the arbor.

"In the north exposure," Doctor Porquier explained,



"the grapes can often only be got to ripen by freeing them from the surrounding leaves."

The news that the government had determined not to run a candidate of its own quickly spread through the town, where it gave rise to great excitement. This abstention had the natural effect of disquieting the different political sections, who had each been counting upon the diversion of a certain number of votes in favor of the official candidate enabling their own man to be returned. The Marquis de Lagrifoul, Monsieur de Bourdeu and the hatter Maurin appeared to divide the support of the voters pretty equally amongst them. There would certainly be a second ballot, and heaven only could tell which name would come at the top. There was certainly some talk of a fourth candidate, whose name nobody quite knew, some moderate, equable man who would possibly bring the different parties into concord and harmony. The Plassans electors, who had grown a little alarmed since they had felt the bridle about their necks, would have been only too glad to come to an understanding amongst themselves, and choose one of their fellow citizens who would be acceptable to all parties.

"The government is wrong to treat us like refractory children," the politicians of the Commercial Club said, in tones of annoyance. "Anybody would suppose that the town was a hot-bed of revolutionism. If the administration had had the tact to bring out the right sort of candidate, we should all have voted for him. The sub-prefect has talked about a lesson. Well, we shall not receive the lesson. We shall be able to find a candidate for ourselves, and we will show that Plassans is a town of sound sense—of true liberty."

They began to look about for their candidate. But the names which were proposed by friends or interested parties only served to increase the confusion. In a

week's time there were twenty candidates before Plassans. Madame Rougon, who had become very uneasy, and was quite able to understand her position, went to see the Abbé Faujas, full of angry indignation against the sub-prefect. "That Péqueur is an ass," she cried, "a fop, a dummy, of no use except as a pretty ornament to the official drawing-room. He has already allowed the government to be defeated, and now he is going to compromise it by an attitude of ridiculous indifference."

"Make yourself easy," said the priest, with a smile; "this time Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies is confining himself to obeying orders. Victory is certain."

"But you've got no candidate!" cried Madame Rougon. "Where is your candidate?"

Then the priest unfolded his plans to her. She expressed her approval of them, for they commended themselves to her intelligence; but she received the name which he confided to her with the greatest surprise.

"What" she exclaimed, "you have chosen that man! No one has ever thought of him, I can assure you."

"I trust that they haven't," replied the priest, smiling again. "We want a candidate of whom no one has thought, so that all parties may accept him without fancying that they are compromising themselves."

Then with the perfect frankness of a shrewd man who has made up his mind to explain his designs, he continued:

"I have very much to thank you for. You have prevented my making many mistakes. I was looking straight toward the goal, and I did not see the strings that were stretched across the path, and which might, perhaps, have tripped me down and brought me to grief. Ever since the day of my arrival in Plassans, I have been looking about for a man, and he is the only one I have

found. He is flexible, extremely capable and energetic. I know that you are not a very great friend of his, and that is the reason that I have not confided my plan to you sooner. But you will see that you are mistaken, and that he will rapidly make his way as soon as he gets his foot into the stirrup, and he will die in a senator's robe. What has finally determined me in his favor is what I have heard about his means. It is said that he has taken his wife back again three separate times, after she had been detected in actual unfaithfulness, and after he had made his good-natured father-in-law pay him a hundred thousand francs on each occasion. If he has really coined money in this way, he will be very useful in Paris in certain matters."

"Then it is a present you are making to the government?" said Felicité, with a laugh.

She allowed herself to be quite convinced. The next day the name of Delangre was in everybody's mouth. His friends said that it was only after the strongest pressure had been brought to bear upon him that he had accepted the nomination. He had refused it for a long time, considering himself unworthy of the position, and insisting that he was not a politician and that Monsieur de Lagrifoul and Monsieur de Bourdeu had had, on the other hand, a long experience of public affairs. Then, when it had been impressed upon him that what Plassans urgently needed was a representative who was unconnected with the political parties, he had allowed himself to be prevailed upon, but he explicitly declared the principles upon which he should act if he were returned. It must be thoroughly understood, he said, that he would not go to the Chamber either to oppose or support the government under all circumstances; that he should look upon himself only as the representative of the interests of the town, and that he would always



vote for liberty with order, and order with liberty, and that he should still remain mayor of Plassans, so that he might have a good opportunity of manifesting the conciliatory and purely administrative part with which he had charged himself. These expressions of his views struck people as being singularly sensible. The knowing politicians of the Commercial Club vied with each other that same evening in lauding him.

The whole thing was like a train of gunpowder. The mine was laid, and a spark had been sufficient to set it off. On every side simultaneously, in the three quarters of the town, in every house, almost in every family, Monsieur Delangre's name was sounded in the midst of unanimous eulogies. He had become the expected Messiah, the savior, who was unknown the previous day, but who had been revealed in the morning, and worshiped ere night.

On the day of the election the majority was overwhelming. All the town seemed to have conspired together. The Marquis de Lagrifoul, and subsequently Monsieur de Bourdeu, bursting with angry indignation and crying out that they had been betrayed, had retired from the contest, and Monsieur Delangre then remained with no other opponent than the hatter Maurin. The latter received the votes of some fifteen hundred intractable Republicans of the outskirts of the town. The mayor had the support of the country districts, the Bonapartist section, the townsmen of the new quarter who were amenable to clerical influence, the small, timid shopkeepers of the old town, and even of certain simple-minded Royalists in the district of Saint-Marc, the aristocratic denizens of which abstained from voting. Monsieur Delangre thus succeeded in obtaining thirty-three thousand votes. The business was managed so promptly, and the victory was won so merrily, that Plas-

sans felt quite amazed, on the evening of the election, to find itself so unanimous. The politicians of the Commercial Club looked at one another in perplexity, like men dazed with their victory.

In the evening Monsieur Rastoil's friends joined those of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, to quietly congratulate each other, in a little drawing-room at the Sub-Prefecture, overlooking the gardens. Tea was served to them. The great victory of the day ended by causing the two parties to coalesce into one. All the regular guests were present.

"I have never systematically opposed any government," said Monsieur Rastoil, after a time, as he took the little cakes which Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies handed to him. "The judicial bench ought to take no part in political struggles. I willingly admit that the Empire has already accomplished great things, and that it has a still nobler future before it, if it continues to advance in the paths of justice and liberty."

The sub-prefect bowed, as though this eulogy was addressed to himself personally. The previous evening, Monsieur Rastoil had read in the "Moniteur" the decree appointing his son assistant public prosecutor at Faveroles.

Monsieur Delangre did not arrive till late. He was received with a perfect ovation. Madame de Condamin had just informed Doctor Porquier that his son Guillaume had been nominated chief clerk at the postoffice. She was circulating good news through the room, and said that the Abbé Bourrette would be his lordship's vicar-general the following year; and she asserted that the Abbé Surin would be a bishop before he was forty, and she announced that Monsieur Maffre was to have a cross.

"Poor Bourdeu!" exclaimed Monsieur Rastoil, with a last sigh of regret.

"Oh, there's no occasion to pity him!" cried Madame de Condamin gayly. "I will undertake to console him. He is not cut out of the Chamber. What he wants is a prefecture. Tell him that he shall have one before very long."

The merriment increased. The fair Octavie's high spirits and the desire which she showed to please everybody, delighted the company. It was really she who was doing the honors of the Sub-Prefecture. She was the queen of the place. And, while she seemed to be speaking quite playfully, she gave Monsieur Delangre the most practical advice about the part he was to play in the Corps Législatif. She took him aside and offered to introduce him to several influential people, an offer which he gratefully accepted.

"Well, what about the Abbé Fenil?" she asked suddenly of the Abbé Faujas, as she took him aside into one of the window recesses. "He has not made any movement, has he?"

"The Abbé Fenil is a man of sense," the priest replied with a slight smile. "It has been hinted to him that he would do well not to interfere in political matters for the future."

In the midst of all the triumphant joy, the Abbé Faujas remained grave and serious. He had won after a hard fight, but Madame de Condamin's chatter wearied him; and the satisfaction of these people, with their poor vulgar ambitions, filled him with disdain. He was master now, and he was no longer under the necessity of veiling and suppressing his real feelings. He could reach out his hand and seize the town, and make it tremble in his grasp. His tall, black figure seemed to fill the room. The men awaited some expression of satisfaction from him; and the women besought him with their eyes, like submissive slaves. But he bluntly broke through



the circle and went away the first, saying only a brief word or two as he took his leave.

When he returned to the Mourets' house, going by way of the Chevillottes alley and the garden, he found Marthe alone in the dining-room, sitting listlessly on a chair against the wall, looking very pale and gazing with a blank expression at the lamp, the wick of which was beginning to char.

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## XX

'The Abbé Faujas laid his hand on Marthe's shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why haven't you gone to bed? I told you that you were not to wait for me."

She started up and stammered:

"I thought you would be back much earlier than this. I fell asleep. I dare say Rose will have got some tea ready."

The priest called for the cook and rated her for not having made her mistress go to bed. He spoke in authoritative tones that admitted of no reply.

"Bring the tea for his reverence, Rose," said Marthe.

"No, I don't want any tea," the priest said with a show of vexation. "Go to bed immediately. It is absurd. I can scarcely control myself. Show me a light, Rose."

Almost immediately afterward Trouche went downstairs with a couple of men whom he had picked up in some low café, and he cried out on the staircase that he knew how to behave himself, and that he was going to see them home.

When the cook went back into the dining-room, she found her mistress sitting down and fallen again into

a sort of melancholy stupor, with her eyes fixed upon the lamp. She shook her and made her go upstairs to bed. Marthe had become very timid. During the night she said she saw great patches of light on the walls of her room, and heard violent blows at the head of her bed. Rose now slept near her, in a little dressing-room close at hand, from which she hastened to calm her at the slightest sound of uneasiness. On this night she had not finished undressing herself before she heard Marthe groaning, and on rushing into her room, she found her lying in the midst of the disordered bedclothes, her eyes staring widely in mute horror, and her clinched fists pressed closely against her mouth to keep herself from crying out. Rose was obliged to talk to her and soothe her as though she were a mere child, and was compelled to look behind the curtains and under the furniture, and assure her that she was mistaken and that there was really no one there. These attacks of terror ended in cataleptic seizures which laid her with her head lying on her pillow, and her eyelids rigidly opened as though she were dead.

"It is the thought of the master that is tormenting her," Rose muttered to herself, as she at last got into bed.

The next day was one of the days when Doctor Porquier was expected. He came regularly twice a week to see Madame Mouret. He patted her hands and said to her with his amiable optimism:

"Oh! there will be nothing serious come of that, my dear lady. You still cough a little, don't you? Ah! it's a mere cold which has been neglected, but which we will cure with syrups."

Marthe then complained to him of intolerable pains in her back and chest, keeping her eyes fixed keenly up-

on him, and trying to discover from his face and manner what he would not say in words.

"I am afraid of going mad!" she cried, breaking into a sob.

The doctor smilingly reassured her. The sight of him always caused her a keen anxiety, and she felt a sort of alarm of this gentle and agreeable man. She often told Rose not to let him come in, saying that she was not ill, and had no need to have a doctor constantly coming to see her. Rose shrugged her shoulders, and ushered the doctor into the room just the same as before. He had almost ceased speaking to Marthe about her ailments, and he seemed now to be merely making friendly calls upon her.

As he was going away, he met the Abbé Faujas, who was returning from Saint-Saturnin's. The priest questioned him as to Madame Mouret's condition.

"Science is sometimes quite powerless," said the doctor gravely, "but the goodness of Providence is inexhaustible. The poor lady has been sorely shaken, but I don't altogether give her up. Her chest is only slightly attacked as yet, and the climate here is favorable."

The priest had listened to him with his stern, silent expression.

"You are mistaken," he said slowly, "Plassans does not agree with Madame Mouret. Why not send her to pass the winter at Nice?"

"At Nice!" repeated the doctor, uneasily.

He looked at the priest for a moment, and then he continued in his complacent tones:

"Nice certainly would be very suitable for her; in her present condition of nervous excitement, a change of surroundings would probably have very beneficial results. I must advise her to make this journey. It is an excellent idea of yours, your reverence."



He bowed, and parted from the Abbé, and made his way to Madame de Condamin's, whose slightest headaches caused him endless trouble and anxiety. At dinner the next day, Marthe spoke of the doctor in almost violent terms. She swore that she would never allow him to visit her again.

"It is he who is making me ill," she exclaimed. "This very afternoon he has been advising me to go off on a journey."

'And I entirely agree with him in that," declared the Abbé Faujas folding his napkin.

She fixed her eyes keenly upon him, and turned very pale as she murmured in a low voice:

"What! Do you then, too, want to send me away from Plassans? Oh! I should die in a strange land, far away from all my old associations, and far away from those I love."

The priest had risen from his seat, and was just about to leave the dining-room. He stepped toward her, and said with a smile:

"Your friends have no other thought than for what is good for your health. Why are you so rebellious?"

'Oh! I don't want to go! I don't want to go!" she cried, stepping back from him.

There was a short contest between them. The blood rushed to the Abbé's cheeks, and he had crossed his arms, as though to withstand a temptation to strike Marthe. She was leaning with her back against the wall, and was holding herself at her full height in despair at her weakness. Then quite vanquished, she stretched out her hands and stammered:

"I beseech you to allow me to remain here. I will do whatever you tell me."

Then, as she burst into sobs, the Abbé shrugged his shoulders and left the room, like a husband fearing an out-

break of tears. Madame Faujas, who was tranquilly finishing her dinner, had witnessed this scene and continued eating. She let Marthe cry on undisturbed.

"You are extremely unreasonable, my dear child," she said after a time, helping herself to some more sweetmeats. "You will end by making Ovide quite detest you. You don't know how to treat him. Why do you refuse to go away from home, if it is necessary for your health? We would look after the house for you, and you would find everything all right and in its place when you came back."

Marthe was still sobbing, and did not seem to hear what Madame Faujas was saying.

"Ovide has so much to think about," the old lady continued. Do you know that he often works till four o'clock in the morning? When you cough all through the night, it disturbs him very much, and distracts his thoughts. He can't work any longer, and he suffers more than you do. "Do this for Ovide's sake, my dear child; go away, and come back to us in good health."

Then Marthe raised her face, all red with weeping, and throwing all the anguish she was suffering into her cry, she wailed out:

"Oh! Heaven lies!"

During the next few days no further pressure was brought to bear upon Madame Mouret to make the journey to Nice. She grew terribly excited at the least reference to it. She refused to leave Plassans with such a show of desperate determination that the priest himself recognized the danger of insisting upon the scheme. In the midst of his triumph she was beginning to cause him terrible anxiety and embarrassment. Trouche said, with his snigger, that it was she who ought to have been sent the first to Les Tulettes. Ever since Mouret had been taken off, she had secluded herself in the

practice of the most rigid devotions, and she constantly refrained from mentioning her husband's name, praying that she might be rendered altogether torpid and oblivious. But she still remained restless and unquiet and returned from Saint Saturnin's only with a keener longing for forgetfulness than she had when she went there.

"Our landlady is going it finely," Olympe said to her husband when he came home in the evening. "I went with her to church to-day, and I had to pick her up from the ground. You would laugh if I told you all the things that she vomited out against Ovide. She is quite furious with him, and says that he has no heart, and that he has deceived her in promising her a heap of consolations. And you should hear her rail, too, against God Almighty Himself! Ah! it's only your pious people who talk so badly of religion! Any one would think, to hear her, that God had cheated her out of a large sum of money. Do you know, I really believe that her husband comes and haunts her at nights."

Trouche was much amused at all this gossip.

"Well, she has herself to blame for that," he said. "If that old joker Mouret has been put away, it was her own doing. If I were Faujas, I should know how to arrange matters, and I would make her as gentle and content as a sheep. But Faujas is an ass, and you will see that he will make a mess of the business. Your brother, my dear, hasn't shown himself sufficiently pleasant to us for me to care to help him out of the bother."

"Ovide certainly looks down upon us too much," Olympe said.

Then Trouche continued in lower tones:

"I say, you know if our landlady were to throw herself down some well with your noodle of a brother, we should be the masters, and the house would be ours. We should



be able to feather our nest nicely. It would be a splendid ending, that!"

Since Mouret's departure, the Trouches also had invaded the ground-floor. Olympe had begun by complaining that the chimneys upstairs smoked, and she had ended by persuading Marthe that the drawing-room, which had been hitherto unoccupied, was the healthiest room in the house. Rose was ordered to light a big fire there, and the two women spent their days there in endless talk, before the huge blazing logs. It was one of Olympe's dreams to be able to live always like this, handsomely dressed and lolling on a couch in the midst of all the luxury of an elegantly furnished room.

"That poor Madame Mouret," she used to say, "has so much worry that she has asked me to help her, and so I devote a little of my time to assisting her. It is really a kindness to do so."

She had, indeed, quite succeeded in winning the confidence of Marthe, who, from lassitude and weariness, handed over to her the petty details of the household management. It was Olympe who kept the keys of the cellar and the cupboards, and she paid the tradesmen's bills as well. She had been deliberating for a long time as to how she should manage to make herself equally free of the dining-room. Trouche, however, dissuaded her from attempting to carry out this design. They would no longer, he said, be able to eat and drink just as they liked, and they would not dare even to drink their wine unwatered, or to ask a friend to come and have coffee. Then Olympe said that at any rate she would bring upstairs their share of the dessert. She crammed her pockets with sugar and she even carried off candle-ends. For this purpose, she had made great pockets of canvas, which she fastened under her skirt,

and which it took her a good quarter of an hour to empty every evening.

"There, there's something for a rainy day," she said, as she bundled a stock of provisions into a box which she then pushed under the bed. "If we should happen to fall out with our landlady, we shall have something there to keep us going for a time. I must bring up some pots of preserves and some salt pork."

"There is no need to make a secret of it," said Trouche. "If I were you, I should make Rose bring them up, as you are the mistress."

Trouche had made himself master of the garden. For a long time past he had envied Mouret as he had watched him pruning his trees, and graveling his walks, and watering his lettuces; and he had indulged in a dream of one day having a plot of ground of his own, where he might dig and plant as he liked. So, now that Mouret was no longer there, he took possession of the garden, with his head full of all kinds of alterations and complete transformations.

Marthe let him have his own way and gave her consent to all the plans that were submitted to her, and in the end they gave over even consulting her. It was only Madame Faujas that the Trouches had to contend with, and she continued to dispute the house with them very obstinately. It was only after a battle royal with her mother that Olympe had been able to take possession of the drawing-room. Madame Faujas had all but won the day on that occasion. It was the priest's doing that she was not victorious.

"You love me very much, mother," he said, "and I forgive you. Make your mind easy; I want something very different from the house. It is not mine, and I keep only what I gain. You will be very proud when

you see my share. Trouche has been useful to me, and we must shut our eyes a little."

Madame Faujas was then obliged to beat a retreat; but she did so with very bad grace, and was forever growling as Olympe's triumphant laughter pursued her. The absolute disinterestedness of her son made her, with her material and baser desires and careful economies, quite desperate. She would have liked to lock the house up in safe keeping so that Ovide might find it ready for his occupation and in perfect order when he wanted it. The Trouches, with their grasping fingers, caused her all the torment and despair of a miser who was being preyed upon by strangers. When the Abbé forbade her to oppose the gradual invasion of the Trouches, she made up her mind that she would at any rate save all she could from the hands of the spoilers, and she began pilfering from the cupboards, just as Olympe did. She, too, fastened big pockets underneath her skirts, and she had a chest which she filled with all the things that she collected together, provisions, linen, and various other miscellaneous articles.

"What is that you are stowing away there, mother?" the Abbé asked one evening as he went into her room, attracted by the noise which she was making in moving the chest.

She began to stammer out a reply, but the priest understood it all at a glance, and flew into a violent rage.

"It is too shameful!" he said. "You have turned yourself into a thief, now! What would the consequences be if you were to be detected? I should be the talk of the whole town!"

"It is all for your sake, Ovide," she murmured.

"A thief! My mother is a thief! Perhaps you think that I thieve too, that I have come here to plunder, and that my only ambition is to lay my hands upon what-



ever I can! Good heavens! what sort of an opinion have you formed of me? We shall have to separate, mother, if we do not understand each other better than this."

This speech quite crushed the old woman. She had remained on her knees in front of the chest, and she fell down in a crouching position upon the floor, very pale and almost choking and stretching out her hands beseechingly. When she was able to speak again, she wailed out:

"It is for your benefit, my child, for yours only, I swear. I have told you before that they are taking everything; she crams everything into her pockets. There will be nothing left for you, not even a lump of sugar. But I won't take anything more, since it makes you angry, and you will let me stay with you, won't you? You will keep me with you, won't you?"

The Abbé Faujas refused to make her any promises until she had restored everything she had taken to its place. For nearly a week he himself superintended the secret restoration of the contents of the chest. He watched his mother fill her pockets, and waited till she came back upstairs again to take a fresh load. For prudential reasons he allowed her to make only two journeys backward and forward every evening. The old woman felt as though her heart were breaking as she restored each article to its former place. But what afflicted her more than anything else was to see that as soon as she had restored each article to its rightful position, Olympe followed in her steps and took possession of it. The linen, the provisions, and the candle-ends, merely changed from one pocket to another.

The Trouches were now reigning undisputedly. The Abbé's own rooms were the only ones they respected. It was only before him that they trembled. But the priest's presence in the house did not prevent them

from inviting their friends, and indulging in riotous living which was kept up till two o'clock in the morning. Guillaume Porquier came with parties of mere youths. Olympe, notwithstanding her thirty-seven years, simpered and put on girlish airs, and more than one of the college lads squeezed very close up to her, which made her ripple with delighted laughter, as though she were being tickled. The house was becoming a perfect paradise to her. Trouche sniggered and joked her when they were long together.

"Well," she said, quite tranquilly, "you have your little amusements, haven't you? We are both quite free to do as we like, you know."

Trouche had, as a matter of fact, all but brought to an abrupt conclusion, the fat life he was living. One of the sisters had caught him in the company of the daughter of a tanner, a tall, fair, young girl, upon whom he had been casting lustful eyes for a long time. The girl said that she was not the only one, but that others, too, had received gifts of sweetmeats. The sister, who knew Trouche's relationship to the vicar of Saint-Saturnin's, had had the forethought not to say anything about the matter, till she had seen the priest. He thanked her, and impressed upon her that the cause of religion would suffer most by such a scandal. The affair was hushed up, and the lady patronesses never had the least suspicion of it. The Abbé Faujas, however, had a terrible scene with his brother-in-law, whom he assailed in Olympe's presence, so that his wife might have a weapon against him, and be able to keep him in check. Ever since this revelation, whenever Trouche did anything to annoy her, Olympe exclaimed sarcastically.

"Go and give the little girls some sugar-plums!"

They had been troubled for a long time past with another source of alarm. Notwithstanding the life in clover

that they were enjoying, and the fact that they were provided with everything out of Marthe's cupboard, they had got terribly into debt in the neighborhood. Trouche squandered his salary away in the cafés, and Olympe wasted the money which she dragged out of Marthe's pockets by telling her some extraordinary story or other, in indulging herself in all sorts of whims and fancies. All the necessities of life they made a point of getting upon credit. There was one account which made them especially uneasy, that of the pastry-cook in the Rue de la Banne, which amounted to more than a hundred francs, as the pastry-cook was a rough, blunt sort of a man, who threatened to lay the whole matter before the Abbé Faujas. The Trouches lived in a state of perpetual alarm, and were constantly in fear of some dreadful scene; but when the bill was actually presented to him, the Abbé Faujas paid it without a word, and even forgot to address any reproaches to them on the subject. The priest seemed to be above all these miserable little matters, and he went on living a gloomy and rigid life in the house that was given up to pillage, without appearing conscious of the devouring teeth which were gnawing the walls away, or the gradual ruin which was falling upon it. Everything was crumbling away around him, while he continued to advance straight toward the goal of his ambition. He still camped like a soldier in his great bare room, indulging himself in no comforts, and showing annoyance when any were attempted to be pressed upon him. Since he had become the master of Plassans, he had dropped back into complete carelessness as to his appearance. His hat was rusty, and his socks were dirty; his cassock, which his mother mended every morning, looked just like the pitiful, worn-out and thread-bare rag which he had worn when he first came to Plassans.



"Pooh! it is very good yet," he used to say, when anyone hazarded a timid remark about it.

He displayed it in the streets, and walked about in it, carrying his head loftily, and altogether unheeding the curious glances which were cast at it. There was no bravado in the matter; he was simply following his natural inclinations. It was his triumph to sit himself down just as he was with his tall, clumsy body and rough, blunt manner and splitting clothes, in the midst of conquered Plassans.

Madame de Condamin, distressed by the strong smell which breathed from his cassock, one day gently took him to task about his appearance.

"Do you know," she said to him, laughingly, "that the ladies are beginning quite to detest you? They say that now you never give yourself the least trouble over your toilet. Once upon a time, when you took your handkerchief out of your pocket, it was just as though there were a choir-boy swinging a thurible behind you."

The priest looked greatly astonished. He was quite unaware of any change in himself. Then Madame de Condamin, drawing a little nearer to him, said in a friendly tone:

"Will you let me speak quite frankly to you, my dear vicar? It is really a mistake on your part to be so negligent of your appearance. You scarcely shave yourself, and you never comb your hair; it is as rough and disordered as though you had been fighting. I can assure you that all this has a very bad effect. Madame Rastoil and Madame Delangre told me yesterday that they could scarcely recognize you. You are really compromising your success."

The priest began to laugh with a laugh of defiance, as he shook his powerful unkempt head.

"Now that the battle is won," he merely replied,

"they must put up with my hair being uncombed."

Plassans had, indeed, to put up with him with his hair uncombed. The flexible priest was now transformed into a stern, despotic master who bent all wills to his own. His face, which had again become cadaverous in its appearance, shone with eyes like an eagle's, and he raised his big hands as though they were filled with threats and chastisements. The town was positively terrified on beholding the master they had imposed upon themselves swelling out thus inordinately with his shabby, unclean clothing and strong odor and unkempt hair. The suppressed alarm of the women tended to strengthen still further his power. He was stern and harsh to his penitents, but not one of them dared to leave him, and they came to him in fear and trembling, in which they found some touch of painful pleasure.

"I was wrong, my dear," Madame de Condamin confessed to Marthe, "in wanting him to perfume himself. I am growing accustomed to him, and I even prefer him as he is. He is indeed a man!"

The Abbé Faujas was supreme at the bishop's. Since the elections, he had left Monseigneur Rousselot only a show of authority. The bishop lived in his study in the midst of his beloved books, where the Abbé, who administered the diocese from an adjoining room, virtually kept him a prisoner, allowing him to see only those persons whom he could fully trust. The clergy trembled before this absolute master. The old white-headed priests bent themselves before him with their ecclesiastical humility and surrender of all will of their own. Often Monseigneur Rousselot when he was alone with the Abbé Surin, wept great, silent tears. He regretted the impetuous mastery of the Abbé Fenil, who had, at any rate, intervals of affectionate softness, while now, under the Abbé Faujas' rule, he felt himself crushed

down beneath a relentless and ceaseless pressure. Then he would smile again and resign himself, saying with a sort of pleasant self-satisfaction:

"Come, my child, let us get to work. I ought not to complain, for I am now leading the life which I have always dreamed of—a life of perfect solitude amongst my books."

Then he sighed and continued in lower tones:

"I should be quite happy, if I were not afraid of losing you, my dear Surin. He will end by not tolerating your presence here any longer. I thought that he looked at you very suspiciously yesterday. Always agree with him, I beseech you, and take him aside and don't spare me. Ah me! I have only you left now."

Two months after the elections, the Abbé Vial, one of the bishop's vicar generals, went to settle at Rome. The Abbé Faujas stepped into his place quite as a matter of course, although it had been promised long ago to the Abbé Bourrette. He did not even promote the latter to the living of Saint-Saturnin's which he vacated, but he preferred to it a young ambitious priest whom he had made a tool of his own.

"His lordship would not hear of you," he said shortly to the Abbé Bourrette when he met him.

When the old priest stammered out that he would go and see the bishop and ask for an explanation, the Abbé Faujas added more gently:

"His lordship is too unwell to see you. Trust your self in my hands; I will plead your cause for you."

From his first appearance in the Chamber, Monsieur Delangre had voted with the majority. Plassans was undisguisedly conquered for the Empire. The Abbé Faujas appeared almost actuated by a feeling of revenge in his rough treatment of the prudent towns-people, closing again the little door that led into the Chevillottes



alley and compelling Monsieur Rastoil and his friends to enter the Sub-Prefecture by the official door on the Place. When he appeared at their friendly gatherings, they showed themselves very humble in his presence; even when he was not present no one dared to make the slightest equivocal remark concerning him.

"He is a man of the greatest merit," declared Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who was counting on getting a prefecture.

"A very remarkable man, indeed," chimed Doctor Porquier.

All the company nodded their heads approvingly.

Monsieur de Condamin, who was beginning to grow irritated by this eulogistic unanimity, occasionally amused himself by putting them all into a state of uneasy embarrassment.

"Well, he hasn't a pleasant temper, anyway," he said.

This remark had a chilling effect upon the company. Each of them was afraid that his neighbor might be in the pay of the terrible Abbé.

"The vicar-general has an excellent heart," Monsieur Rastoil prudently remarked; "but, like all great minds, he appears at first sight to be a little stern."

"It is just so with me; I am very easy to get on with, but I have always had the reputation of being a hard, stern man," exclaimed Monsieur de Bourdeu, who had again become reconciled with the party after a long private interview which he had had with the Abbé Faujas.

Wishing to put everyone at ease, the president said:

"Have you heard that there is a probability of a bishopric for the vicar-general?"

Then they brightened up. Monsieur Maffre expressed the opinion that it would be of Plassans itself that the Abbé Faujas would become bishop, after the retirement of Monseigneur Rousselot, whose health was very feeble.

"Everyone would gain by it," said the Abbé Bourrette guilelessly. "Illness has embittered his lordship, and I know that our excellent Faujas has made the greatest efforts to persuade him out of certain unjust prejudices which he entertains."

"He is very fond of you," asserted Judge Paloque, who had just received his decoration; "my wife has heard him complain of the way in which you are neglected."

When the Abbé Surin was present, he, too, joined in the general chorus; but, although he had a miter in his pocket, to use the expression of the priests of the diocese, the success of the Abbé Faujas made him uneasy. He looked at him in his pretty way, and felt wounded by his rude demeanor, as he called to mind his lordship's prediction, and tried to discover the weak point which would bring the colossus toppling in the dust.

The gentlemen of the party were all quite satisfied, however, except Monsieur de Bourdeu and Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, who were still waiting for the marks of the government's favor; and these two were, consequently, the warmest partisans of the Abbé Faujas. The others, to tell the truth, would have been glad to rebel, if they had dared. They were growing weary of the continual gratitude which was exacted from them by their master, and they ardently wished that some strong, bold hand would effect their deliverance. And so they glanced at each other curiously, drooping their eyes again immediately.

It was only Marthe who remained an obstacle. The Abbé Faujas felt that she was escaping him more and more every day. He stiffened his will and called up all his forces of priest and man to bend her, without succeeding in moderating within her the flame which he had fanned into life. She was striving to reach the logical

end of her passionate longings. It was bitter pain and anguish to her to be, as it were, walled in by her body and prevented from craning herself up to that threshold of light which seemed to be ever receding out of her reach. She shivered and trembled now at Saint-Saturnin's in that cold gloom where she had once felt such thrills of glowing delight. The swelling peals of the organ rolled over her bent neck without stirring its soft down with tremors of voluptuous joy; the white clouds of incense no longer softly lulled her into sweet mystic dreams; the gleaming chapels and the sacred pyxes that flashed like stars, the chasubles with their sheen of gold and silver all now seemed pale and wan to her eyes that were dull and dim with tears. Like a damned soul yearning after Paradise, she threw up her arms in bitter desperation and she besought the love that denied itself to her, as she sobbed and wailed out:

"My God, my God! why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Bowed down with shame, and hurt, as it were, by the cold silence of the vaulted roof, Marthe left the church burning with the anger of a scorned woman. She had wild dreams of pouring out her blood as an atonement and she writhed madly at her impotence to do more than to pray, and at not being able to spring at a single bound into the arms of God. Then, when she returned home, she felt that her only hope was in the Abbé Faujas. It was he alone that could make her God's. He had discovered to her the initiatory joys, he must now tear down the whole veil. But the priest fell into a passion with her and forgot himself so far as to treat her very rudely, refusing to hear her so long as she was not on her knees before him, humbled and unresisting as a corpse. She listened to him, standing upright, sustained by an impulse of revolt that thrilled her through her whole being, as she vented upon him the bitterness that came



of her deceived yearnings and accused him of the base treachery which was torturing her.

Old Madame Rougon often thought it was her duty to intervene between the Abbé and her daughter, as she had formerly done between the latter and Mouret.

"Well," she said to the priest with a smile, "can't you manage to live in peace? Marthe is constantly complaining and you seem to be perpetually grieving her. I know very well that women are exacting, but you must confess that you are a little wanting in consideration. Do, I beg you, my dear Abbé, be a little gentler with her."

She also scolded him in a friendly fashion for his slovenly appearance. She could see, with her shrewd feminine intelligence, that he was taking advantage of and abusing his victory. Then she began to make excuses for her daughter. One day, however, when she was thus showing him how he might make what he liked of Marthe, the Abbé Faujas grew weary of her perpetual tenderings of advice.

"No, no!" he cried rudely, "your daughter is mad; she bores me to death, and I won't have anything more to do with her."

Madame Rougon looked him keenly in the face and pressed her lips closely together.

"Listen to me, my friend," she said after a short silence; "you are wanting in tact, and that will prove your ruin. I have assisted you, not for your own sake, but to please our friends in Paris. They wrote to me and asked me to pilot you, and I did pilot you. But understand this, I will never allow you to come the master over me. It's all very well for that little Péqueur, and that simple Rastoil, but we are not at all afraid of you and we mean to remain the masters. My husband

conquered Plassans before you did, and I warn you that we shall keep our conquest."

From this day there was a great coldness between the Rougons and the Abbé Faujas. When Marthe again came to complain to her, her mother said to her very plainly:

"Your Abbé is only making a fool of you. You will never derive the slightest satisfaction from that man. If I were in your place I shouldn't hesitate about telling him a few plain truths. To begin with, he has been disgustingly dirty for a long time past, and I can't understand how you can bear to take your meals at the same table with him."

The day on which her mother had told her that the Abbé was only making a fool of her, Marthe went again to Saint-Saturnin's with a bleeding heart and resolved upon a last supreme appeal. She remained in the deserted church for two hours, pouring out her soul in prayer, waiting longingly for the ecstasy that came not, and torturing herself with her search for consolation. Impulses of deep humility stretched her prostrate upon the flag-stones, momentary thrills of rebellion made her start up again with her white teeth clinched, while her whole being, wildly racked and strained, broke down within her at not being able to grasp or kiss aught save the aching void of her own passion. When she rose and left the church, the sky seemed black to her; she was not conscious of the pavement beneath her feet, and the narrow streets left upon her the impression of an immense and lonely wilderness. She threw down her hat and shawl upon the dining-room table and went straight upstairs to the Abbé Faujas' room.

The Abbé was sitting, buried in thought, at his little table, and his pen had fallen from his fingers. He opened the door, still preoccupied with his thoughts, but

when he saw Marthe standing before him, very pale, and with the light of a deep-seated resolution burning in her eyes, he gave way to a gesture of anger.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Why have you come upstairs? Go down again and wait for me, if you have anything to say to me."

She pushed him aside and entered the room without speaking a word.

The priest hesitated for a moment, struggling against the influence which was prompting him to raise his hand against her. He remained standing in front of her, without closing the door that was opened widely.

"What do you want?" he repeated. "I am busy."

Then Marthe went and closed the door, and when she had done so she drew nearer to the Abbé and said to him:

"I want to speak to you.

She sat down and looked about the room, at the narrow bed, the shabby chest of drawers, and at the great black wood Christ, the sight of which, as it stood out conspicuously on the naked wall, sent a passing thrill through her. A freezing silence seemed to fall from the ceiling. The grate was quite empty; there was not even a pinch of ashes in it.

"You will take cold," said the priest in a calmer voice. "Let us go downstairs, I beg of you."

"No; I want to speak to you," said Marthe again.

Then, clasping her hands together like a penitent making her confession, she continued:

"I owe you much. Before you came, I was without a soul. It was you who willed that I should be saved. It is owing to you that I have known the only joys of my life. You are my savior and my father. For these last five years I have only lived through you and for you."



Her voice broke down and she was slipping onto her knees. The priest stopped her with a gesture.

"And now, to-day," she cried, "I am suffering and I have need of your help. Listen to me, my father. Do not withdraw yourself from me. You cannot abandon me thus. I tell you that God does not listen to me any longer. Have pity upon me, I beseech you. Teach me what I must do to make myself whole, and to ever advance in the love of God."

"You must pray," said the priest gravely.

"I have prayed; I have prayed for hours with my head buried in my hands, trying to lose myself in every word of adoration, and yet I have not received consolation. I have not felt the presence of God."

"You must pray and pray again, pray continually, pray until God is moved by your prayers and descends into you."

She looked at him in anguish.

"Then there is nothing but to pray?" she asked. "You cannot give me any help?"

"No; none at all," he replied roughly.

She threw up her trembling hands in a burst of desperation and her throat was swollen with anger. But she restrained herself, and she stammered out:

"Your heaven is fast closed up. You have led me on so far only to crush me against the wall. I was very peaceful, you will remember, when you came. I was living quietly at home here, without a single desire or curiosity. It was you who woke me up with words that stirred and roused my heart. It was you who made me enter upon a fresh youth. Oh! you cannot tell what joys you made me know at first! It was like a sweet soft warmth thrilling through my whole being. My heart woke up within me. I was filled with mighty hopes. Sometimes, when I reflected that I was forty years old, it all

seemed foolish to me, and I smiled, and then I defended myself, for I felt so happy in it all. Now I want the rest of the promised happiness. What I have known cannot be all. There is surely something more, isn't there? I believe that I am growing weary of this desire that is ever waking up in me, a desire that burns me and tortures me. I have no time to lose, now that my health is broken down, and I don't want to find myself deceived and duped. There must be something else; tell me that there is something else."

The Abbé Faujas stood quite impassive, letting this flood of words pass over him without reply.

"There is nothing else! there is nothing else!" she continued, in a burst of indignation; "then you have deceived me! You promised me heaven, down there on the terrace, on those star-lit evenings, and I believed your promises. I sold myself, and gave myself up. I was quite mad in those first loving transports of prayer. To-day the bargain holds no longer. I shall return to my old ways, and resume my old peaceful quiet. I will turn everyone out of the house, and make it as it used to be, and I will again sit in my old corner on the terrace, and mend the linen. Needle-work never wearies me. And I will have Désirée back to sit at my side on her little stool. She used to sit there, the dear innocent, and laugh and make dolls—"

Then she broke out into sobs.

"I want my children! They were my safeguard. Since they went away I have lost my head, and have done things that I ought not to have done. Why did you take them from me? They went away from me one by one, and the house became like a strange house to me. My heart was no longer wrapped up in it; I was glad when I left it for an afternoon; then, when I came back in the evening, I seemed to have fallen amongst stran-

gers. The very furniture seemed cold and unfriendly. I quite hated the house. But I will go and fetch them back again, the poor darlings. Everything will be changed back to what it used to be directly they return. Oh! if I could only sink down again into my old sleepy calm!"

She was growing more and more excited. The priest tried to calm her by a method which he had often before found efficacious.

"Be calm, my dear lady, be calm," he said, and he tried to take her hands and hold them pressed between his own.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, recoiling from him. "I don't want you to do so. When you hold me I am as weak as a child. The warmth of your hands takes all my resolution and strength away. The trouble would only begin again to-morrow for I cannot go on living like this, and you only assuage me for an hour."

A deep gloom passed over her face, and she exclaimed:

"No! I am damned now! I shall never love my home again. And if the children come, they would ask for their father— Oh! it is that which is killing me! I shall never be forgiven till I have confessed my crime to a priest."

Then she fell upon her knees.

"I am a guilty woman. That is why God turns His face away from me."

The Abbé Faujas tried to make her rise up from her knees.

"Be silent!" he cried loudly. "I cannot hear your confession here. Come to Saint-Saturnin's to-morrow."

"My father," she said supplicatingly, "have pity upon me. To-morrow I shall not have the strength for it."

"I forbid you to speak," he cried more violently than



before. "I won't listen to anything; I will turn my head away and close my ears."

He stepped backward and crossed his arms, trying to check the confession that was on Marthe's lips. They looked at each other for a moment in silence, with the lurking anger that came from their conscious complicity.

"It is not a priest who would listen to you," said the Abbé in a more choking voice. "Here there is only a man to judge and condemn you."

"A man!" she cried excitedly; "well, so much the better. I prefer a man."

She rose from her knees, and continued her feverish flow of words.

"I am not confessing, I am telling you of my wrongdoing. After the children had gone, I allowed their father to go away too. He had never struck me, the unhappy man. It was I myself who was mad. I felt hot burnings all over my body, and I scratched myself and sought the coolness of the floor to calm my excitement. Then, when the crisis was past, I felt so ashamed at seeing myself naked before strangers that I dared not speak. Oh, you cannot guess what frightful night-mares overwhelmed me and made me hurl myself onto the floor. All hell seemed to be racking my brain with its torments. He, poor man, with his chattering teeth, excited my pity. It was he who was afraid of me. When you had left the room he dared not venture near me, and he passed the night on a chair."

The Abbé Faujas tried to stop her.

"You are killing yourself," he exclaimed. "Don't stir up these recollections. God will take count of your sufferings."

"It is I who have sent him to Les Tuilettes," she continued, silencing the priest with an energetic gesture.

"You all told me that he was mad. Oh, the unendurable life I have led! I have always been terrified at the thought of madness. When I was quite young, I used to feel as though my skull were being opened and my head were being emptied. I seemed to have a block of ice within my brow. Then I felt that feeling of awful cold again, and I was perpetually in fear of going mad. They took my husband away. I let them take him. I didn't know what I was doing. But, ever since that day, I have never been able to close my eyes without seeing him over there. It is that which makes me behave so strangely, and roots me for hours together in the same spot, with my eyes wide open. I know the house; I can see it. My uncle Macquart showed it to me. It is as gloomy as a prison, with its black windows."

She seemed to be choking. She raised her handkerchief to her lips, and when she took it away again it was spotted with blood. The priest, with his arms crossed rigidly in front of him, waited till the attack was over.

"You know it all, don't you?" she resumed, in a stammering voice. "I am a miserable guilty woman; I have sinned for you. But give me life, give me happiness, and I shall enter without remorse into that superhuman life which you have promised me."

"You lie," said the priest slowly, "I know nothing; I was ignorant of your having committed this wickedness."

She recoiled from before him, clasping her hands, and stammering, and gazing at him with terrified glances. Then, unable to restrain herself, she broke out wildly and recklessly:

"Hear me, Ovide, I love you, and you know that I do, do you not? I have loved you, Ovide, since the first day that you came here. I refrained from telling you

so, for I saw it displeased you; but I knew quite well that you were gaining my whole heart. I was satisfied with that, and I hoped that one day we might be able to be happy in a wholly divine union. Then it was that I emptied the house for your sake. I dragged myself on my knees, and I became your slave. You surely cannot go on being cruel forever. You have consented to everything; you have allowed me to make myself belong only to you, and to remove all the obstacles which kept us apart. Think of all this, I beseech you. Now that I am ill and abandoned, and my heart is broken and my head seems empty, you surely cannot reject me. It is true that we have said nothing openly to each other; but my love spoke, and your silence made answer. It is the man to whom I am speaking, and not the priest. You told me that it was only a man who was here. The man will hearken to me. I love you, Ovide, I love you, and it is killing me."

She burst out into a fit of sobbing. The Abbé Faujas had braced himself up to his full height. He stepped toward Marthe and poured out upon her all his scorn of woman.

"Oh, miserable flesh!" he said. "I was hoping that you would be reasonable, and that you would never lower yourself to the shame of uttering all this filthiness. Ah! it is the eternal struggle of evil against the strong will. You are the temptation from below that leads to base back-sliding and final overthrow. The priest has no enemy save such as you, and you ought to be driven from the churches as impure and accursed."

"I love you, Ovide," she stammered out again; "I love you, help me."

"I have already come too near you," the priest continued. "If I fall, it will be you, woman, who have deprived me of my strength by your own sole desire. Go



away and depart from me; you are Satan! I will beat you to force the evil angel to come out of your body."

She fell into a crouching position against the wall, silent with terror at the priest's threatening fist. Her hair became unloosened, and a long white lock fell over her brow. As she looked about the room for a refuge, her eyes fell upon the black wood Christ, and she had still the strength left to stretch out her hands toward it with a passionate gesture.

"Do not implore the Cross!" cried the priest in wild anger. "Jesus lived chastely, and it was that which enabled Him to die."

Just then Madame Faujas came into the room, carrying on her arm a great basket of provisions. She put it down at once on seeing her son so violently angry, and she threw her arms round him.

"Ovide, my child, calm yourself," she said, as she caressed him.

Then, turning upon the cowering and crushed Marthe an annihilating glance, she cried:

"Can you never leave him at peace? Since he won't have you, at any rate don't make him ill. Come, go downstairs; it is quite impossible for you to remain here."

Marthe did not move. Madame Faujas was obliged to lift her up and thrust her toward the door. She stormed at her and accused her of having waited till she had gone out, and made her promise that she would not again come upstairs and make such scenes, and then she banged the door violently after her.

Marthe went tottering and reeling down the stairs. She had left off crying, and kept saying to herself:

"Francois will come back again; Francois will turn them all out into the street."

## XXI

The Toulon coach, which passed through Les Tuilettes where it changed horses, left Plassans at three o'clock. Marthe, goaded on by a fixed and unswerving resolve, was anxious not to lose a single moment. She put on her shawl and hat, and ordered Rose to dress immediately.

"I can't tell what madame is after," the cook said to Olympe; "but I fancy we are going away for some days."

Marthe left the keys in the cupboard doors; she was in a hurry to be off. Olympe, who went with her to the door, tried vainly to find out where she was going and how long she would be away.

"Well, make yourself quite easy," she said to her in her pleasant way, as they parted at the door; "I will look after everything, and you will find everything all right when you come back. Don't hurry yourself, and give yourself time to do all you want. If you go to Marseilles, bring us back some fresh shell-fish."

Before Marthe had turned the corner of the Rue Taravelle, Olympe had taken possession of the whole house. When Trouche came home he found his wife banging the doors about and examining the contents of the drawers and closets, as she hummed and sang and rushed about the rooms.

"She's gone off and taken that beast of a cook with her!" she cried to him, throwing herself lollingly into an easy-chair. "What a piece of luck it would be if they both got upset into a ditch and stopped there!"

Well, we must enjoy ourselves for as long as we have the chance."

Marthe and Rose reached the Cours Sauvaire only just in time to catch the Toulon coach. The coupé was disengaged. When the cook heard her mistress tell the conductor to set them down at Les Tuilettes, she took her place with an expression of vexation, and before the coach had got out of the town, she had commenced grumbling in her cross-grained fashion.

"Well, I did think that at last you were going to behave sensibly! I felt sure that we were going to Marseilles to see Monsieur Octave. But it's just like you. You are always hunting after troubles, and always doing things that upset you."

Marthe was lying back in her corner in a half-swooning condition. Now that she was no longer energetically striving against the sorrow which was breaking her heart, a death-like faintness was creeping over her; but the cook was not even looking at her.

"Did anyone ever hear of such an absurd idea as going to see the master?" she continued. "A cheerful sort of sight it will be for us. We sha'n't be able to sleep for a week after it. You may be as frightened as you like at nights, but you'll not get me to come and look under the furniture for you. It isn't as though your going to see him could do the master any good. He's just as likely to fly at your face as not! I hope to goodness that they won't let you see him. It's against the rules, I know. I ought not to have got into the coach when I heard you mention Les Tuilettes, for I don't think you would have ventured to go on such a foolish errand all by yourself."

A deep sigh from Marthe checked her flow of words. She turned round to her mistress, and saw her pale and



suffocating, and she grew still angrier than before as she opened the window to let in the fresh air.

She continued in this strain till they arrived at Les Tulettes, eulogizing the Faujases and the Trouches, and accusing her mistress of all manner of wrong-doings. She concluded by saying:

"Ah, they are the sort of people who would make excellent masters if they were rich enough to be able to afford to keep servants. But fortune only comes in the way of bad-hearted folks!"

Marthe, who was now calmer, made no reply. She gazed vaguely out of the window watching the scraggy trees flit past and the wide-stretching fields unroll themselves like great lengths of brown cloth. Rose's growlings were lost in the jolting of the coach.

When they reached Les Tulettes, Marthe hastened toward the house of her uncle Macquart, followed by the cook who had now subsided into silence and was contenting herself by shrugging her shoulders and biting her lips.

"Hallo! is that you?" the uncle cried in great surprise. "I thought you were in your bed. I heard that you were ill. Well, my little dear, you really don't look very strong. Have you come to ask me for some dinner?"

"I should like to see Francois, uncle," Marthe said.

"Francois?" repeated Macquart, looking her in the face. "You would like to see Francois? It is a very kind thought of yours. The poor fellow has been crying out for you a great deal. I have seen him from the end of my garden knocking his fist against the walls while he called for you to come to him. And it is to see him that you have come, here? I really thought that you had all forgotten all about him over yonder.

Great tears welled to Marthe's eyes.

"It will not be very easy to see him to-day," Macquart

continued. "It is getting on for four o'clock, and I'm not at all sure that the manager will give you leave. Mouret has not been very quiet lately. He smashes everything he can lay his hands on and talks about burning the place down. These madmen are not in a pleasant humor every day."

Marthe trembled as she listened to her uncle; she was going to question him, but instead of doing so she merely stretched out her hands supplicatingly toward him.

"I beseech you to help me," she said. "I have come on purpose. It is absolutely necessary that I should speak to Francois to-day, at once. You have friends in the asylum and you can obtain me admission."

"No doubt, no doubt," he replied without committing himself further.

He appeared to be in a state of great perplexity, unable to clearly discover the cause of Marthe's sudden journey, and seemed to be discussing the matter in his own mind from a personal point of view known only to himself. He glanced inquisitively at the cook, who turned her back upon him. At last a slight smile began to play about his lips.

"Well," he said, "since you wish it, I will see what I can do for you. Only remember that if your mother is displeased about it, you just tell her that I was not able to dissuade you. I am afraid that you are going to do yourself harm; it isn't a pleasant place to visit."

Rose absolutely declined to accompany them to the asylum. She had seated herself in front of a fire of vine-stumps which was blazing on the great hearth.

"I don't want to have my eyes torn out," she said snappishly. "The master isn't over-fond of me. I had rather stop here and warm myself."

"It would be very good of you if you were to get us

some mulled wine ready," Macquart whispered in her ear. "The wine and the sugar are in the cupboard there. We shall want it when we come back." Macquart did not take his niece to the principal gate of the asylum. He went round to the left and inquired at a little low door for the warder Alexandre, with whom, on his appearance, he exchanged a few words in low tones. Then they all three silently entered the seemingly interminable corridors. The warder walked in front.

"I will wait for you here," said Macquart, coming to a halt in a little court-yard. "Alexandre will remain with you."

"I would rather be left alone," said Marthe.

"Madame would very quickly have enough of it if she were," Alexandre replied, with a tranquil smile. "I'm running a good deal of risk as it is."

He took Marthe through another court and stopped in front of a little door. As he softly turned the key, he said in low tones:

"Don't be afraid. He has been quieter to-day, and they have been able to take the strait-waistcoat off. If he shows any violence you must step out backward and leave me alone with him."

Marthe trembled as she passed through the narrow doorway. At first she could only see something lying in a heap against the wall in one of the corners. The day was waning and the cell was only lighted by the pale glimmer which fell from a grated window.

"Well, my fine fellow!" Alexandre exclaimed familiarly, as he stepped up to Mouret and tapped him on the shoulder; "I am bringing you a visitor. I hope you will behave yourself properly."

Then he returned and leaned his back against the door and kept his eyes fixed upon the madman. Mouret got



up slowly onto his feet. He did not show the slightest sign of surprise.

"Is it you, my dear?" he said in his quiet voice; "I was expecting you; I was getting uneasy about the children."

Marthe's knees trembled under her, and she looked at him anxiously, rendered quite speechless by his affectionate reception of her. He did not appear changed at all. If anything, he looked better than he had done before. He was sleek and plump and cleanly shaved and his eyes were bright. His little self-satisfied mannerisms had reappeared, and he rubbed his hands and winked his right eye, and stalked with his old bantering air.

"I am very well indeed, my dear. We can go back home together. You have come for me, haven't you? I hope the garden has been well looked after. The slugs were dreadfully fond of the lettuces, and the beds were quite eaten up with them, but I know a way of destroying them. I have got some splendid ideas into my head that I'll tell you of. We are very comfortably off, and we can afford to pay for our fancies."

He rattled along at great length, inquiring about every single tree in his garden, and going into the minutest details of the household arrangements, and showing an extraordinary memory of a host of insignificant matters. Marthe was deeply touched by the gentle affection which he manifested for her, and she thought she could detect a loving delicacy in the care which he took to address nothing that savored of a reproach to her, and to make not even the least allusion to what had passed.

She felt that she was forgiven, and she swore to herself to atone for her crime by becoming the submissive servant of this man who was so sublime in his good nat-

ure. Great silent tears rolled down her cheeks, and her knees bent under her in her gratitude.

"Take care!" the warder whispered in her ear. "I don't like the look of his eyes."

"But he is not mad!" she stammered out; "I swear to you that he is not mad! I must speak to the manager. I want to take him away with me at once."

"Take care!" the warder repeated sharply, pulling her by her arm.

Mouret had suddenly stopped short in the midst of his chatter and he fell crouching upon the ground. Then he began to crawl briskly along by the side of the wall on his hands and knees.

"Wow! wow!" he barked out, in hoarse, prolonged tones.

He gave a spring up into the air and fell down upon his side. Then a dreadful scene followed. He began to writhe about like a worm, and discolored his face with blows from his fist, and he tore his flesh with his nails. In a short time he was half-naked, his clothes torn to rags, and himself bruised and crushed and groaning.

"Come away, madame, come away!" cried the warder.

Marthe stood rooted to the ground. She recognized in the scene before her her own writhings upon the ground. It was just in this way that she had thrown herself upon the floor of her bedroom; it was just in this way that she had beaten and torn herself. She even recognized the very tones of her voice. Mouret had just the same rattling groan. It was she who had brought this poor man into this miserable state.

"He is not mad!" she stammered out; "he cannot be mad; it would be too horrible! I would rather die!"

The warder put his arm round her and pulled her out of the cell, but she remained pressing herself against the outside of the door. She could hear the sounds of a

struggle going on within, screams like those of a pig that is being slaughtered; then the sound of a dull fall like that of a bundle of damp linen could be heard, and then there was a death-like silence. When the warder came out of the cell again, the night had nearly fallen. Through the partially opened door, Marthe could see nothing but a black void.

"Well, upon my word, madame," cried the warder, "you are a very queer person to say that he is not mad. I nearly had to leave my thumb behind me; he got firmly hold of it between his teeth. However, he's quieted now for the next few hours."

As he took her back to her uncle, he continued:

"You've no idea how cunning they all are. They are as quiet as can be for hours together, and talk to you in a quite sensible manner, and then, without the least notice or warning, they fly at your throat. I could see quite well that he was up to some mischief or other just now, when he was talking to you about the children, there was such a strange look in his eyes."

When Marthe got back to her uncle, in the small court-yard, she exclaimed feverishly, in a weak and broken voice, and without being able to shed a tear:

"He is mad! he is mad!"

"There's no doubt he's mad," said her uncle with a snigger. "Why, what did you expect to find him? People are not brought here for nothing, and the place isn't healthy, either. If I were to be shut up there for a couple of hours, I should go mad myself."

He was watching her out of the corner of his eye, and he noted her every nervous start and shudder. Then, in his good-natured tones he said to her:

"Perhaps you would like to go and see the grandmother?"



Marthe made a gesture of terror, and hid her face in her hands.

"It would be no trouble to anyone," he said. "Alexandre would be glad to take us. She is over there, on that side, and there is nothing to be afraid of about her. She is perfectly quiet. She never gives any trouble, does she, Alexandre? She always remains seated and gazing in front of her. She hasn't moved for the last dozen years. However, if you'd rather not see her, we won't go."

As the warder was taking his leave of them, Macquart invited him to come and have a glass of mulled wine, winking his eyes in a certain fashion which seemed to decide Alexander to accept the invitation. They were obliged to support Marthe, whose legs sank beneath her at each step. When they reached the house, they were actually carrying her. Her face was convulsed, her eyes were staring widely, and her whole body was stiffened and rigid in one of those nervous seizures which kept her like a dead woman for hours at a time.

"There! what did I tell you?" cried Rose, when she saw them. "A nice state she's in! How are we going to get home, I should like to know? Good heavens! how can people take such absurd fancies into their heads? The master ought to have given her neck a twist, and it would have taught her a lesson, perhaps."

"Pooh!" said Macquart; "I'll take her and lay her down on my bed. It won't kill us if we have to sit up round the fire all night."

He drew aside a calico curtain which was hung in front of a recess. Rose proceeded to undress her mistress, growling and grumbling as she did so. The only thing they could do, she said, was to put a hot brick at her feet.

"Now that she's all snug, we'll have a drop to drink,"

resumed Macquart, with his wolfish snigger. "That wine of yours smells confoundedly good, old lady!"

Rose, mollified and pleased by these compliments, began to laugh. The vine-wood fire was now a great mass of glowing embers. The cups were filled up again.

"And so," said Macquart, leaning on his elbows and looking Rose in the face, "it was a sudden whim of my niece to come here?"

"Oh, don't talk about it," replied the cook; "it will make me angry again. Madame is getting as mad as the master. She can't tell any longer who are her friends and who are not. I believe she had a quarrel with his reverence, the vicar, before she set off; I heard their voices raised loudly."

Macquart broke out into a loud laugh.

"They used, however, to get on very well together."

"Yes, indeed; but nothing lasts long with such a brain as madame has got. I'll be bound she's looking back regretfully now to the thrashings the master used to give her at nights. We found his stick in the garden."

Macquart looked at her more keenly, and, as he drank his hot wine, he said:

"Perhaps she came to take Francois back with her."

"Oh, Heaven forbid!" cried Rose, with an expression of horror. "The master would go on finely in the house; he would kill us all. His coming back is one of my greatest dreads; I'm in a constant trouble lest he should make his escape and get back some night and murder us all. When I think about it when I'm in bed, I can't go to sleep. I fancy I can see him stealing in through the window with his hair bristling up and his eyes flaming like matches."

Macquart grew noisily merry and he rapped his cup on the table,

"That would be very unpleasant," he said, "very unpleasant. I don't suppose he feels very kindly toward you, least of all toward the vicar who has stepped into his place. The vicar would only make a mouthful for him, big as he is, for madmen they say, are hugely strong. I say, Alexandre, just imagine poor Francois suddenly making his appearance at home! He would make a pretty clean sweep there, wouldn't he? It would be a fine sight, eh?"

He cast glances at the warder, who went on tranquilly drinking his mulled wine and made no reply beyond nodding his head assentingly.

"Oh! it's only a fancy; it's all nonsense," Macquart added, as he observed Rose's terrified looks.

Just at this moment, Marthe began to struggle violently behind the calico curtain; and she had to be held for some minutes to keep her from falling onto the floor. When she was again lying stretched out in a corpse-like rigidity, her uncle came and warmed his legs before the fire, thinking to himself and murmuring, without paying heed to what he was saying:

"The little woman isn't very easy to manage, indeed."

Then he suddenly said: "The Rougons, now, what do they say about all this business? They take the Abbé's side, don't they?"

"The master didn't make himself pleasant enough for them to regret him," replied Rose. "There was nothing too bad for him to say against them."

"Well, he wasn't far wrong there," said Macquart. "The Rougons are miserable skinflints. Just think that they refused to buy that corn-field over there, a magnificent speculation which I undertook to manage. Félicité would pull a queer face if she saw Francois coming back."

He began to snigger again, and he took a turn round



the table. Then, with an expression of determination, he lighted his pipe.

"We musn't forget the time, my boy," he said to Alexandre, with another wink. "I will go back with you; Marthe seems quiet now. Rose will get the table laid by the time I return. You must be hungry, Rose, eh? As you are obliged to stay the night here, you shall have a mouthful with me."

He went away with the warder, and he had not returned to the house again at the end of half an hour.

Rose, who was beginning to feel a little tired of being alone, opened the door and went out and leaned over the terrace, watching the deserted road in the clear night air. As she was going back into the house, she fancied she could see two dark shadows standing in the middle of a path behind a hedge.

"It looks just like the uncle," she said to herself; "he seems to be talking to a priest."

A few minutes later, Macquart returned. He said that that blessed Alexandre had been chattering to him interminably.

"Wasn't it you who were over there just now with a priest?" asked Rose.

"I, with a priest!" he cried. "Why, you must have been dreaming; there isn't a priest in the neighborhood."

He rolled his little glistening eyes about. Then he seemed to be rather uneasy about the lie he had told, and he added:

"Well, there is the Abbé Fenil, but it's just the same as if he wasn't here, for he never goes out."

"The Abbé Fenil isn't up to much," remarked the cook.

This seemed to annoy Macquart.

"Why do you say that? Not up to much, eh? He

does a great deal of good here, and he's a very worthy sort of fellow. He's worth a whole heap of priests who make a lot of fuss."

His irritation, however, immediately disappeared, and he began to laugh upon observing that Rose was looking at him in surprise.

"I was only joking, you know," he said. "You are quite right; he's like all the other priests; they are all a set of hypocrites. I know now who it was that you saw with me. I met our grocer's wife. She was wearing a black dress, and you must have mistaken that for a cassock."

Rose made an omelet, and Macquart placed a piece of cheese upon the table. They had not finished eating when Marthe sat up in bed with the look of astonishment of a person who wakes up in a strange place. When she had brushed aside her hair and recollected where she was, she sprang to the ground and said she must be off at once. Macquart appeared very much vexed at her awaking.

"It is quite impossible," he said, "for you to go back to Plassans to-night. You are shivering with fever, and you would fall ill on the road. Rest yourself, and we will see about it to-morrow. To begin with, there is no conveyance here."

"You can drive me in your gig," Marthe said.

"No, no; I can't."

Marthe, who was dressing herself with feverish haste, declared that she would walk to Plassans rather than stay the night at Les Tulettes. Her uncle seemed to be thinking. He had locked the door and slipped the key into his pocket. He entreated his niece, threatened her, and invented all kinds of stories to induce her to remain. She paid no attention to what he was saying, and finished by putting on her bonnet.

"You are very much mistaken if you imagine you can persuade her to give in," exclaimed Rose, who was quietly finishing her cheese. "She would get out through the window first. You had better put your horse to the trap."

After a short interval of silence, Macquart, shrugging his shoulders, exclaimed angrily:

"Well, it makes no difference to me! Let her lay herself up if she likes! I was only thinking about her own good. Come along; what will happen will happen! I'll drive you over."

Marthe had to be carried to the gig; she was trembling violently with fever. Her uncle threw an old cloak over her shoulders. Then he gave a cluck with his tongue and set off.

"It's no trouble to me," he said, "to go over to Plassans this evening; on the contrary, indeed, there's always some amusement to be had there."

It was about ten o'clock. There was a ruddy glimmer about the sky, heavy with rain clouds, that cast a feeble light upon the road. All the way as they drove along Macquart kept himself bent forward and cast glances into the ditches and behind the hedges. When Rose asked him what he was looking for, he said that some wolves had come down from the ravines of La Seille. He had quite recovered his good humor. When they were between two and three miles from Plassans the rain began to fall. It poured down, cold and pelting. Then Macquart began to swear, and Rose would have liked to beat her mistress, who was moaning underneath the cloak. When at last they reached Plassans the rain had ceased, and the sky was blue again.

"Are you going to the Rue Balande?" asked Macquart.

"Of course," replied Rose in astonishment.



Macquart then began to explain that as Marthe seemed to him to be very ill, he had thought it might perhaps be better to take her to her mother's. After much hesitation, however, he consented to stop his horse at the Mourets' house. Marthe had not even thought of bringing a latch-key with her. Rose, however, fortunately had her own in her pocket, but when she tried to open the door it would not move. The Trouches had shot the bolts inside. She knocked against it with her fist, but without producing any other answer than a dull echo in the lobby.

"It's no use your giving yourself any further trouble," said Macquart with a laugh. "They won't disturb themselves to come down. Well, here you are shut out of your own home. Don't you think now that my first idea was a good one? We must take the poor child to the Rougons'. She will be better there than in her own room; I assure you she will."

Félicité was overwhelmed with alarm when she saw her daughter arriving at such a late hour, drenched with rain and seeming half dead. She put her to bed on the second floor, set the house in great commotion, and called up all the servants. When she grew a little calmer, as she sat by Marthe's bedside, she asked for an explanation.

"What has happened? How is it that you have brought her to me in such a state?"

Then Macquart with a great show of kindness, told her about "the dear child's" expedition. He defended himself and said that he had done all that he could to dissuade her from going to see François, and he ended by calling upon Rose to confirm him in this, as he saw that Félicité was scanning him narrowly with a suspicious glance. Madame Rougon, however, continued to shake her head.

"It is a very strange story!" she said; "there is something more in it than I can understand."

She knew Macquart very well, and she guessed that there was some rascality somewhere from the expression of joy which she could detect in his eyes. She questioned Rose at great length without succeeding in learning anything more. Marthe was lying back upon the pillow in a fainting state.

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## XXII

It was perfectly dark in the cell at Les Tuilettes. A draught of icy-cold air awoke Mouret from the cataleptic stupor into which his access of violence in the evening had thrown him. He remained lying against the wall in perfect stillness for a moment or two, with his eyes staring widely open; and then he began to roll his head about gently upon the cold stone, wailing like a child just awakened from its sleep. The current of chill damp air struck against his legs, and he got up and looked round to see where it came from. In front of him he saw the door of his cell thrown wide open.

"She has left the door open," said the madman aloud; "she will be expecting me, and I must be off."

He went out, and then he came back and felt over his clothes after the manner of a methodical man who is afraid of forgetting something, then he closed the door carefully behind him. He passed through the first court with an easy unconcerned gait as though he were merely taking a stroll. As he was entering the second one, he caught sight of a warder who seemed to be on the watch. He stopped and deliberated for a moment. But, the warder having disappeared, he crossed the court and

reached another door which led to the open country. He closed it behind him without any appearance of astonishment or haste.

"She is a good woman all the same," he murmured. "She must have heard me calling her. It must be getting late. I will go home at once for fear they should be feeling uneasy."

He struck out along a path. It seemed quite natural to him to be amongst the open fields. When he had gone a hundred yards he had forgotten altogether that Les Tulettes was behind him, and he imagined that he had just left a vine-grower's, where he had bought fifty hogsheads of wine. When he reached a spot where five roads met, he recognized where he was, and he began to laugh as he said to himself:

"What a goose I am! I was going to go up the hill toward Saint-Eutrope; it is to the left I must turn. I shall be at Plassans in a good hour and a half."

Then he went merrily along the high-road looking at each of the mile-stones as at an old acquaintance. He stopped for a moment before certain fields and country-houses with an air of interest. Heavy drops of rain began to fall; the wind was blowing from the east and was full of moisture.

"Hallo!" said Mouret, looking up at the sky uneasily, "I mustn't stop loitering about there. The wind is in the east, and there's going to be a pretty down-pour. I shall never be able to get to Plassans before it begins; and I'm not well wrapped up either."

He gathered up round his breast the thick gray woolen waistcoat which he had torn into rags at Les Tulettes. He had a bad bruise on his jaw to which he raised his hand without heeding the sharp pain which it caused him. The high-road was quite deserted, and he only met a cart going down a hill at a leisurely pace. The



driver was asleep, and made no response to his friendly good night. The rain did not overtake him till he reached the bridge across the Viorne. It distressed him very much and he went down to take shelter under the bridge, grumbling to himself that it was quite impossible to go on through such weather, and that nothing ruined clothes so much, and that if he had known what was coming he would have brought an umbrella. He waited patiently for a long half-hour, amusing himself by listening to the splashing of the rain; then, when the down-pour was over, he returned to the high-road and at last reached Plassans. He took the greatest care to keep himself from getting splashed with mud.

It was nearly midnight, though Mouret calculated that it could scarcely yet be eight o'clock. He passed through the empty streets, feeling quite distressed that he had kept his wife waiting such a long time.

"She won't be able to understand it," he thought. "The dinner will be quite cold. Ah! I shall get a nice reception from Rose."

He reached the Rue Balande and stood before his own door.

"Ah!" he said, "I have not got my latch-key."

He did not knock at the door, however. The kitchen window was quite dark, and the other windows in the front were equally blank of all sign of life. A sense of deep suspicion took possession of the madman; with an instinct that was quite animal-like, he scented danger. He stepped back into the shadow of the neighboring houses, and examined the front again; then he seemed to come to a resolution, and he went round into the Chevillottes alley. But the little door that led into the garden was bolted. Then, impelled by a sudden rage, he threw himself against it with tremendous force, and the little door, rotten with damp, broke into two pieces. The

violence of the shock stunned Mouret for the moment, and left him quite unconscious as to why he had just broken down the door, which he now tried to mend again by joining the broken pieces.

"That's a nice thing to have done, when I might so easily have knocked," he said to himself with a sudden pang of regret. "It will cost me at least thirty francs to get a new door."

He was now in the garden. As he raised his head and saw the bedroom on the first floor brightly lighted, he came to the conclusion that his wife was going to bed. This caused him great astonishment, and he told himself that he must certainly have dropped off to sleep under the bridge while he was waiting for the rain to stop. It must be very late, he thought. The windows of the neighboring houses, Monsieur Rastoil's, as well as those of the Sub-Prefecture, were in darkness. He fixed his eyes again upon his own house as he caught sight of the glow of a lamp on the second floor behind the Abbé Faujas's thick curtains. It was like a flaming eye, lighted up in the forehead of the house, and it seemed to scorch him. He pressed his brow with his burning hands, and his head grew dizzy and confused, racked with some horrible recollection like a vague night-mare, in which nothing is clearly defined, which seemed to be pregnant with the menace of some long-standing danger to himself and his family, which was growing and increasing in horror, and threatening to swallow up the house unless he could do something to save it.

"Marthe, Marthe, where are you?" he stammered out in low tones. "Come and bring away the children."

He looked about the garden for Marthe. He could no longer recognize the garden. It seemed to him to be larger; to be empty and gray and like a cemetery. The bushes of box had vanished, the lettuces were no longer

there, and the fruit-trees had disappeared. He turned round again, and came back and knelt down to see if it was the slugs that had eaten everything up. The disappearance of the box caused him an especial pang, as though some of the actual life of the house had died out. Who was it that had killed it? A dull, angry indignation rose up in him as he contemplated all this ruin.

"Marthe, Marthe, where are you?" he called again.

He looked for her in the little conservatory to the right of the terrace. It was littered up with the dead dry bodies of the tall box-bushes. They were piled up in bundles in the midst of the stumps of the fruit-trees. In one corner was Désirée's bird-cage, hanging from a nail, with the door broken off and the wire-work sadly torn. The madman stepped back, overwhelmed with fear as though he had opened the door of a vault. Stammering and overcome, he went back to the terrace and paced up and down before the door and the shuttered windows. His increasing rage gave his limbs the suppleness of a wild beast's. He braced himself up and trod along noiselessly, trying to find some opening. An air-hole into the cellar was sufficient for him. He squeezed himself up and glided in with the nimbleness of a cat, scraping the wall with his nails. At last he was inside the house.

The cellar door was only latched. He made his way through the thick darkness of the passage, groping along the walls with his hands, and pushing open the kitchen door. The matches were on a shelf at the left. He went straight to this shelf, struck a light to enable him to get a lamp which stood upon the mantel-piece without breaking anything. Then he looked about him. There appeared to have been a big meal there that evening. The kitchen was in a state of festive disorder. The



table was strewn with dirty plates and dishes and glasses. There was a litter of still warm pans on the sink and the chairs and the floor. A coffee-urn that had been forgotten was still boiling away over a lighted lamp, tilted over on one side like a tipsy man. Mouret put it straight and then arranged the pans tidily. He smelt at them, sniffed at the drops of liquor that remained in the glasses, and counted the dishes and plates with growing angry irritation. This was no longer his quiet orderly kitchen; it seemed as though a whole hotel full of food had been wasted, and all this guzzling disorder reeked of indigestion.

"Marthe! Marthe!" he repeated again as he returned into the passage, carrying the lamp in his hand; "answer me, tell me where they have shut you up. We must be off, we must be off at once."

He searched for her in the dining-room. The two cupboards to the right and left of the stove were open. From a burst bag of gray paper on the edge of a shelf lumps of sugar were falling onto the floor. Higher up Mouret could see a bottle of brandy with the neck broken off, plugged up with a piece of rag. Then he got onto a chair to examine the cupboards. They were half empty. Not being able to find Marthe in the closets, Mouret searched all over the room, looking behind the curtains and underneath the furniture. Fragments of bone and pieces of broken bread were lying about the floor, and there were marks on the table that had been left by sticky glasses. Then he crossed the hall and went to look for Marthe in the drawing-room. But, as soon as he opened the door, he stopped short. It could not really be his own drawing-room. The bright mauve paper, the red-flowered carpet, the new easy-chairs covered with cerise damask, filled him with amazement.

He was afraid to enter a room that did not belong to him, and he closed the door.

"Marthe! Marthe!" he stammered out again in accents of despair.

He went back and stood in the middle of the passage, unable to quiet the hoarse panting which was swelling out his throat. Where had he got to, that he could not recognize a single spot? Who had been transforming his house in such a way? His memory and recollections were quite confused. He could recall nothing but shadows gliding along the passage; two shadows, at first poverty-stricken, soft-spoken and self-suppressing, then two shadows that were tipsy and disreputable-looking and that leered and sniggered. He raised his lamp, the wick of which was burning smokily, and the shadows grew bigger, lengthened themselves out upon the walls, mounted up the wall of the staircase and filled and made a prey of the whole house. Some horrid filthiness, some fermenting putrescence had found its way into the house and had rotted the woodwork, rusted the iron and split the walls. Then he seemed to hear the house crumbling away like a ceiling falling down from utter dampness and to feel it melting away like a handful of salt thrown into a basin of hot water.

Up above there were peals of ringing laughter which made his hair stand on end. He put the lamp down and went up the stairs to look for Marthe. He crept up on his hands and knees without making the slightest sound and with all the nimbleness and quietness of a wolf. When he reached the landing of the first floor, he knelt down in front of the door of the bedroom. A ray of light streamed from underneath it. Marthe must be going to bed.

"What a jolly bed this is of theirs," Olympe's voice

exclaimed; "you can quite bury yourself in it, Honoré; I am right up to my eyes in feathers."

She laughed and stretched herself out and sprang about in the midst of the bedclothes.

"Ever since I've been here," she continued, "I've been longing to sleep in this bed. It made me almost ill, wishing for it. One gets quite warm directly. I feel just as though I were wrapped up in cotton-wool."

Trouche, who had not yet got into bed, was examining the bottles on the dressing-table.

"She has got all kinds of scents," he said.

"Well, as she isn't here, we may just as well treat ourselves to the best room!" Olympe continued. "There's no danger of her coming back and disturbing us. I have fastened the doors up. You will be getting cold, Honoré."

Trouche now opened the drawers and began groping about amongst the linen.

"Put this on; it's smothered with lace," he said, tossing a night-dress to Olympe. I shall wear this red handkerchief myself."

When Trouche was at last getting into bed, she said to him:

"Put the grog on the night-table. We sha'n't want to get up and go to the other end of the room for it. There, my dear, we are like real householders now!"

They lay down side by side, with the eider-down quilt drawn up to their chins, luxuriating in the soft warmth.

"I ate a lot this evening," said Trouche after a short silence.

"And drank a lot too!" added Olympe with a laugh. "I feel very cozy and snug. But the tiresome part is that my mother is always interfering with us. She has been quite awful to-day. I can't take a single step about the



house without her being at me. She has quite spoilt my day's enjoyment."

"Hasn't the Abbé some idea of going away?" asked Trouche after another short interval of silence. "If he is made a bishop he will be obliged to leave the house to us."

"One can't be sure of that," Olympe replied petulantly. "I dare say mother means to keep it. How jolly we should be here, all by ourselves! I would make our landlady sleep upstairs in my brother's room; I would persuade her that it was healthier than this. Pass me the glass, Honoré."

They both took a drink and then they covered themselves up again.

"Ah!" said Trouche, "I'm afraid it won't be so easy to get rid of them, but we can try, at any rate. I believe the Abbé would have changed his quarters if he had not been afraid that the landlady would have considered herself deserted and made a bother. I think I'll try to talk the landlady over, and I'll tell her a lot of tales to persuade her to turn them out."

They both grew very merry, and they began to plan how they would arrange the room. They would change the place of the chest of drawers, they said, and they would bring up a couple of easy-chairs from the drawing-room. Their speech was growing gradually drowsier, and at last they dropped into silence.

"There! you're off now!" murmured Olympe, after a little time. "You're snoring with your eyes open! Well, let me come to the other side, and at any rate, I can finish my novel. I'm not sleepy if you are."

She got up and rolled him like a mere lump toward the wall, and then began to read. But, before she had got through the first page, she turned her head uneasily toward the door. She fancied she could hear a strange

noise on the landing. Then she cried petulantly to her husband, as she gave him a blow with her elbow:

"You know very well that I don't like that sort of joke. Don't make yourself into a wolf; anyone would fancy that there was one at the door. Well, go on if it pleases you; you are very irritating."

Then she angrily absorbed herself in her book again, after having sucked the slice of lemon in her glass.

Mouret now quitted, with the same stealthy movements as before, the door of the bedroom, where he had remained crouching. He went up to the second floor and knelt before the Abbé Faujas' door, squeezing himself close to the key-hole. He choked down Marthe's name that was rising up in his throat, and he examined with his glistening eye the corners of the room and satisfied himself that no one was being kept confined there. The great, bare room was in deep shadow; a small lamp which stood upon the table cast a circular patch of light upon the floor, and the priest himself, who was writing, seemed like a great black stain in the midst of the yellow glare. After he had examined the curtains and behind the chest of drawers, Mouret's gaze fell upon the iron bedstead, upon which the priest's hat was lying, resembling the locks of a woman's hair. There was no doubt that Marthe was in the bed, Mouret thought. Hadn't the Trouches said that she was sleeping up here now? But as he continued to gaze he saw that the bed was quite undisturbed, and looked, with its cold, white coverings, like a tomb-stone. His eyes were getting more accustomed to the shadow. The Abbé Faujas appeared to hear some sound, for he glanced at the door. When the maniac saw the priest's calm face, his eyes reddened and a slight foam appeared at the corner of his lips, and it was with difficulty that he suppressed a shout. Then he went away on his hands and knees again,

down the stairs and along the passages, still repeating in low tones:

"Marthe! Marthe!"

He searched for her through the whole house; in Rose's room, which he found empty; in the Trouches' apartments, which were filled with the spoil of the other rooms; in the children's old rooms, where he burst into tears as his hands came across a pair of old worn boots which had been Désirée's. He went up and down the stairs, and soon there was not a single corner from the cellar to the attic which he had not investigated. Marthe was nowhere in the house; the children were not there either, nor Rose. The house was empty; the house might crumble to pieces.

Mouret sat down upon one of the stairs between the first and second floors. He choked down that violent panting which in spite of himself continued to swell out his throat. He sat waiting, with his back leaning against the balustrade and his eyes wide open in the darkness, absorbed in the contemplation of a scheme which he was patiently thinking out. His senses became so acute that he could hear the slightest sounds that stirred in the house. Down below him Trouche was snoring, and Olympe was turning over the pages of her book with a slight rubbing of her fingers against the paper. On the second floor the Abbé Faujas' pen made a scratching sound like the crawling of an insect's feet, while, in the adjoining room, Madame Faujas accompanied it as she slept with the noise of her heavy breathing. Mouret sat for an hour with his ears sharply strained. Olympe was the first of those who were awake to succumb to sleep. He could hear her novel fall onto the floor. Then the Abbé Faujas laid down his pen and undressed himself, gliding quietly about his room in his slippers. He slipped his clothes off silently, and he did



not even make the bed creak as he got into it. Ah! the house now had gone to rest. But the madman could tell from the sound of the Abbé's breath that he was not yet asleep. Gradually the priest's breath grew deeper. All the house was now asleep.

Mouret waited on for another half-hour. He still listened with strained ears, as though he could hear the four sleeping persons descending into deeper and deeper depths of slumber. The house lay wrapped in darkness and unconsciousness. Then the maniac rose up and made his way slowly into the passage.

"Marthe isn't here any longer; the house isn't here; nothing is here," he murmured.

He opened the door that led into the garden, and he went down to the little conservatory. When he got inside he methodically removed the great dry box-bushes, and carried them away in enormous armfuls, taking them upstairs and piling them up in front of the doors of the Trouches and the Faujases. He felt a yearning craving for a bright light, and he went into the kitchen and lighted all the lamps, which he took and placed upon the tables in each room, and on the landings, and along the passages. Then he brought up the rest of the box-bushes. They were now piled up higher than the doors. As he was making his last journey with them, he raised his eyes and saw the windows. Then he went out into the garden again, and got the trunks of the fruit-trees and stacked them up under the windows, skillfully arranging for little currents of air which should make them blaze freely. The stack seemed to him only a small one.

"There is nothing else," he murmured: "there is certainly nothing else."

Then a thought struck him, and he went down into the cellar, and recommenced his journeying backward and forward. He was now carrying up the supply of

fuel for the winter, the coal and the vine-branches and the wood. The pile under the windows was growing gradually bigger. As he carefully arranged each bundle of vine-branches, he was thrilled with a lively sense of satisfaction. He next proceeded to distribute the fuel through the rooms on the ground-floor, and he placed a heap of it in the entrance-hall, and another heap in the kitchen. Then he piled up the furniture on the top of the different heaps. An hour had been sufficient for him to get his work finished. He had taken his boots off, and had glided about all over the house, with heavily laden arms, so skillfully and dexterously that he had not let a single piece of wood fall roughly. As far as this one firmly fixed idea of his went, he was perfectly in possession of his senses.

When all was ready, he lingered for a moment to enjoy his work. A few fragments of coal had fallen down upon the stairs, and he ran off to get a brush, and carefully swept the black dust off the steps. Then he made a final inspection with the careful precision of a methodical man who means to do things in the way that they ought to be done. He became gradually excited with his lively satisfaction, and he dropped onto his hands and knees again, and began to run about, breathing more heavily and stertorously in his savage joy.

Then he took a vine-branch and set fire to the heaps. First of all he lighted the pile on the terrace underneath the windows. Then he leapt back into the house and set fire to the heaps in the drawing-room and dining-room, and then to those in the kitchen and entrance-hall. Then he sprang up the stairs and flung the remains of his blazing brand upon the piles that lay against the doors of the Trouches and Faujases. An ever-increasing rage was thrilling him, and the lurid blaze of the fire completed his wild madness. He came down the stairs

again in terrific leaps, and rushed up and down through the thick smoke, fanning the flames with his breath, and casting handfuls of coal into them.

The house was now roaring like an over-crammed stove. The flames broke out at all points at once with a violence that split the floors. The maniac made his way upstairs again through sheets of fire, singeing his hair and blackening his clothes. He posted himself on the second floor, crouching down on his hands and knees and pushing his head forward with a wolf-like growl. He kept guard over the landing, and his eyes never quitted the priest's door.

"Ovide! Ovide!" shrieked a panic-stricken voice.

Madame Faujas' door at the end of the landing was suddenly opened and the flames swept into the room with the roar of a tempest. The old woman could be seen in the midst of the fire. Stretching out her arms, she hurled aside the blazing brands and sprang onto the landing, pulling and pushing away with her hands and feet the burning heap that blocked up her son's door, calling out all the while to the priest in utter despair. The maniac crouched still lower down, his eyes gleaming fiercely as he continued his muttered growl.

"Wait for me! Don't get out of the window!" Madame Faujas cried, striking at her son's door.

She pushed against it with all her strength, and the charred door yielded easily. She reappeared holding her son in her arms. He had taken time to put on his cassock, and he was choking and suffocated with the smoke.

"I am going to carry you, Ovide," she cried, with energetic determination. "Hold well on to my shoulders, and clutch hold of my hair if you feel you are slipping down. I'll carry you through it all."

She laid him upon her shoulders as though he were a



child, and this sublime mother, this old peasant woman carrying her devotion to death itself, did not totter in the least beneath the crushing weight of this great swooning, unresisting body. She crushed out the burning brands with her naked feet and made a free passage through the flames by brushing them aside with her hands so that her son might not even be touched by them. But just as she was about to go downstairs, the maniac, whom she had not observed, sprang upon the Abbé Faujas and tore him from off her shoulders. His muttered growl turned into a wild shriek, and he broke out into a fit of wild violence at the head of the stairs. He belabored the priest, tore him with his nails and strangled him.

"Marthe! Marthe!" he called out.

Then he rolled down the blazing stairs, still clutching the priest's body in his grasp; while Madame Faujas, who had driven her teeth into his throat, drained his blood. The Trouches perished in their drunken stupor without a groan; and the house, gutted and undermined, collapsed in the midst of a cloud of sparks.

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## XXIII

Macquart did not find Doctor Porquier at home, and the latter did not arrive at Madame Rougon's till nearly half-past twelve. The whole house was still in commotion. Rougon himself was the only one who had not got out of bed. Emotion had a killing effect upon him, he said. Felicité, who was still sitting in the same chair by Marthe's bedside rose to meet the doctor.

"Oh, my dear doctor, we are so very anxious!" she said. "The poor child has never stirred since we put her to bed there. Her hands are already quite cold.

I have kept them in my own, but it has done no good."

Doctor Porquier looked narrowly at Marthe's face, and then, without making any further examination of her, and still standing up, he compressed his lips and made a vague gesture with his hands.

"My dear Madame Rougon," he said, "you must summon up your courage."

Félicité burst into sobs.

"The end is at hand," the doctor continued in a lower voice. "I have been expecting this sad termination for a long time past; I must confess so much now. Both of poor Madame Mouret's lungs are diseased, and in her case phthisis has been complicated by nervous derangements."

He had taken a seat now and a smile still played about the corners of his lips, the smile of the polished doctor who thinks that even in the presence of death itself a suave politeness is demanded of him.

"Don't give way and make yourself ill, my dear lady. The catastrophe was inevitable and any little accident might have hastened it any day. I should imagine that poor Madame Mouret must have been subject to coughing when she was very young; wasn't she? I should say that the germs of the disease have been incubating within her for a good many years past. Latterly and especially within the last three years, phthisis has been making frightful strides in her. How pious and devotional she was! I have been quite touched to see her passing away in such sanctity. Well, well, the decrees of Providence are inscrutable; science is very often quite unavailing."

He settled himself comfortably for the night in an easy chair; Félicité grew a little calmer. When Doctor Porquier gave her to understand that Marthe had only a few more hours to live, she thought of sending off for

Serge from the Seminary, which was near at hand. She asked Rose to go there for him, but the cook refused at first.

"Do you want to kill the poor little fellow as well?" she exclaimed. "It would be too great a shock for him to be called up in the middle of the night to come and see a dead woman. I won't be his murderer!"

In the end, however, she consented to go to the Seminary. Doctor Porquier had stretched himself out in front of the fire and with half-closed eyes he continued to pour out consolatory and kind words to Madame Rougon. A slight rattling sound began to be heard in Marthe's chest. Uncle Macquart, who had not appeared again since he went away two good hours before, now gently pushed the door open.

"Where have you been to?" Felicité asked him, taking him into a corner of the room.

He told her that he had been to put his horse and trap up at The Three Pigeons. But his eyes sparkled so, and there was such a look of diabolical cunning about him, that she was filled with a thousand suspicions.

"Anyone would imagine that you had been following and playing the spy upon somebody," she said, looking at his muddy trousers. "You are concealing something from me, Macquart. It is not right of you. We have always treated you very well."

"Oh, very well, indeed!" sniggered Macquart. "I'm glad you've told me so. Rougon is a skin-flint. He treated me like the lowest of the low in the matter of that corn-field. Where is Rougon? Snoozing comfortably in his bed, eh? It's little he cares for all the trouble one takes about his relations."

The smile with which he accompanied these last words very much disquieted Felicité. She looked him keenly in the face.



"What trouble have you taken for his relations?" she asked. "Are you going to grudge having brought back my poor Marthe from Les Tuilettes? I tell you again that all that business has a very suspicious look. I have been questioning Rose, and it seems to me that you wanted to come straight here. It surprises me that you did not knock more loudly in the Rue Balande; they would have come and opened the door. I'm not saying this because I don't want my dear child to be here; I am glad to think, on the contrary, that she will, at any rate, die amongst her own people, and will have only loving faces about her."

Macquart seemed greatly surprised, and he interrupted her by saying with an uneasy manner:

"I thought you and the Abbé Faujas were the best of friends."

She made no reply, but stepped up to Marthe, whose breathing was now becoming more difficult. When she left the bedside again, she saw Macquart trying to look out into the darkness. He had raised the blind, and was rubbing the moist pane with his hand.

"Don't go away to-morrow without coming and talking to me," she said to him. "I want to have all this cleared up."

"Just as you like," he replied. "You are very difficult to please. First you like people, and then you don't like them. I always keep on in the same regular easy-going way."

He was evidently very much vexed to discover that the Rougons no longer made common cause with the Abbé Faujas. He tapped the glass with the tips of his fingers, and still kept his eyes on the black night. Just at this moment the sky was reddened by a bright glow.

"What is that?" Felicité asked.

Macquart opened the window and looked out. "It

looks like a fire," he said unconcernedly. "There is something burning behind the Sub-Prefecture."

There were sounds of commotion in the Place. A servant came into the room with a scared look and told them that the house of madame's daughter was on fire. It was believed, he continued, that madame's son-in-law, he whom they had been obliged to shut up, had been seen walking about the garden carrying a burning vine-branch. The most unfortunate part of the matter was that it was considered hopeless to save the lodgers. Félicité turned herself sharply round, and pondered for a minute, keeping her eyes fixed upon Macquart. Then she understood it all clearly.

"You promised me solemnly," she said in a low voice, "to conduct yourself quietly and decently when we set you up in your little house at Les Tuilettes. You have everything that you want, and are quite independent. This is abominable, disgraceful, I tell you! How much has the Abbé Fenil given you to let François escape?"

Macquart was going to break out angrily, but Madame Rougon made him keep silent. She seemed much more uneasy about the consequences of the matter than indignant at the crime itself.

"And what a terrible scandal there will be, if it all comes out," she continued. "Have we ever refused you anything? We will talk together to-morrow, and we will speak again of that corn-field about which you are so bitter against us. If Rougon were to come to hear of such a thing as this, he would die of annoyance."

Macquart could not keep from smiling. He defended himself energetically, and swore that he knew nothing about the matter, and that he had had no hand in it. Then, as the sky was growing redder, and as Doctor Porquier had already gone downstairs, he left the room,

saying with an air of being anxiously curious about the matter:

"I am going to see what is happening."

It was Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies who had given the alarm. There had been an evening-party at the Sub-Prefecture, and he was just going to bed when a few minutes before one o'clock he saw a strange red reflection upon the ceiling of his bed-room. Going to the window, he was struck with astonishment at seeing a great fire burning in the Mourets' garden, while a shadow, which he did not recognize at first, was dancing about in the midst of the smoke, brandishing a blazing vine-branch. Almost immediately afterward flames broke out from all the openings on the ground-floor. The sub-prefect hurriedly put on his trousers again, called for his servant, and sent the porter off to summon the fire-brigade and the authorities. Then, before going to the scene of the disaster, he finished dressing himself and stood before his mirror to assure himself that his mustache was quite as it should be. He was the first to arrive in the Rue Balande. The street was absolutely deserted, save for two cats which were rushing across it.

"They will let themselves be broiled like cutlets inside there!" thought Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, astonished at the quiet and sleepy appearance of the house on the street side, where as yet there was no sign of the conflagration.

He knocked loudly at the door, but he could hear nothing but the roaring of the fire in the well of the staircase. Then he knocked at Monsieur Rastoil's door. There piercing screams were heard, and hurried rustlings to and fro, banging of doors and choking shouts.

"Aurélie, cover up your shoulders!" the president's voice cried.

Monsieur Rastoil rushed out onto the pathway, fol-



lowed by Madame Rastoil and her younger daughter, the one who was still unmarried. In her hurry, Aurélie had thrown over her shoulders a cloak of her father's which left her shoulders bare. She turned very red as she caught sight of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies.

"What a terrible disaster!" stammered the president. "Everything will be burnt down. The wall of my bedroom is quite hot already. The two houses are almost joined. Ah! my dear sub-prefect, I haven't even stopped to remove the time-pieces. We must organize assistance. We can't stand by and watch all our belongings destroyed in an hour or two."

Madame Rastoil, scantily covered with a dressing-cape, was bewailing her drawing-room furniture, which she had only just had newly covered. By this time, several of the neighbors had appeared at their windows. The president summoned them to his assistance and commenced to remove his effects from his house. He made the time-pieces his own particular charge, and he brought them out and deposited them on the pathway opposite. When the easy-chairs from the drawing-room were carried out, he made his wife and daughter sit down, and the sub-prefect remained by their side to encourage them.

"Make yourselves easy, ladies," he said. "The engine will be here directly and then there will be a vigorous attack made upon the fire. I think I may undertake to promise that your house will be saved."

The windows of the Mourets' house burst open, and the flames broke out from the first floor. Suddenly the street was lighted up by a bright glow, and it was as light as mid-day. A drummer was passing through the Place of the Sub-Prefecture some distance off, sounding the alarm. A number of men ran up and a chain was formed, but there were no buckets and the engine did not arrive. In the midst of the general consternation, Monsieur

Péqueur des Saulaies without leaving the two ladies, shouted out orders in a loud voice:

"Leave a free passage! The chain is too closely torded down there! keep yourselves two feet apart!"

Then he turned to Aurélie and said in a low voice:

"I am very much surprised that the engine has not arrived yet. It is a new engine. This will be the first time it has been used. I sent the porter off immediately, and I told him also to call at the police-station."

The gendarmes were the first to arrive. They kept back the curious spectators, whose number was increasing, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. The sub-prefect himself went to put the chain in a better order, as it was bulging out in the middle, through the pushing about of some rough fellows who had run up from the outskirts of the town. The little bell of Saint-Saturnin's was sounding the alarm in its cracked notes, and a second drum was beating faintly at the bottom of the street. At last the engine arrived with a noisy clatter. The crowd made way for it, and the fifteen firemen of Plassans made their appearance, running and panting; but, in spite of Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies's active intervention, it took another good quarter of an hour before the engine was in working order.

At last a jet of water shot up, and the crowd gave a sigh of satisfaction. The house was now blazing from the ground floor to the second floor like a huge torch. The water hissed as it fell into the burning mass, and the flames, separating themselves into yellow tongues, seemed to shoot up still higher than before. Some of the firemen had mounted onto the roof of the president's house, and were breaking open the tiles with their picks on the chance of the fire extending to it.

"It's all up with the place!" muttered Macquart, who was standing quietly on the pathway with his hands in

his pockets, watching the progress of the fire with a lively interest.

Out in the street a perfect open-air drawing-room had been established. The easy-chairs were arranged in a semi-circle as though to allow their occupants to watch the spectacle at their ease. Madame de Condamin and her husband had just arrived. They had scarcely got back home from the Sub-Prefecture, they said, when they heard the drum beating the alarm. Monsieur de Bourdeu, Monsieur Maffre, Doctor Porquier, and Monsieur Delangre, accompanied by several members of the municipal council, had also lost no time in hastening to the scene. They all clustered round poor Madame Rastoil and her daughter, trying to comfort and console them with sympathetic remarks. After a time they sat down in the easy-chairs, and a general conversation took place while the engine was snorting away half a score yards off, and the blazing beams were cracking loudly.

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies still showed the greatest calmness and kindly attention.

"I assure you that your house is in no danger at all," he said to the president; "the force of the fire is spent now."

Madame de Condamin was questioning the sub-prefect.

"Oh! that is terrible!" she cried. "I thought that the lodgers had had time to escape. Has nothing been seen of the Abbé Faujas?"

"I knocked at the door myself," said Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies, "but I couldn't make any one hear. When the firemen arrived I had the door broken open and I ordered them to place the ladders against the windows. But nothing was of any use. One of our brave gendarmes, who ventured into the lobby, narrowly escaped being suffocated with the smoke—"

"As the Abbé Faujas has been, I suppose! What a



horrible death!" said the fair Octavie with a shudder.

The ladies and gentlemen looked into one another's faces, that showed pale in the flickering light of the fire. Doctor Porquier explained to them that death by fire was probably not so painful as they imagined.

"When the fire once reaches one," he said in conclusion, "it can only be a matter of few seconds. Of course it depends, to some extent, upon the violence of the conflagration."

Some one called out that the wind was carrying the sparks toward the Sub-Prefecture, and Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies immediately sprang up, and making apologies for his departure, hastened off to guard against this new danger. Monsieur Delangre was anxious that a last attempt should be made to rescue the victims. The captain of the fire-brigade roughly told him to go up the ladder himself if he thought such a thing possible; he had never seen such a fire before, he said. The devil himself must have lighted it, for the house was burning like a bundle of chips, at all points at once. The mayor, followed by some kindly disposed persons, then went round into the Chevillottes alley. Perhaps, he said, it would be possible to get to the windows from the garden side.

"It would be very magnificent if it were not so sad," remarked Madame de Condamin, who was now calmer.

The fire was certainly becoming a superb spectacle. Showers of sparks rushed up in the midst of huge blue flames; chasms of glowing red showed themselves behind each of the gaping windows, while the smoke rolled gently away in a huge purplish cloud, like the smoke from Bengal lights set burning at some display of fireworks.

"Look at the third window on the second floor!" Monsieur Maffre cried out suddenly. "You can see a bed

burning quite distinctly on the left hand. It has yellow curtains, and they are blazing like so much paper."

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies now returned at a gentle trot to reassure the ladies and gentlemen. It had been a false alarm.

"The sparks," he said, "are certainly being carried by the wind toward the Sub-Prefecture, but they are extinguished in the air before they reach it. There is no further danger. They have got the fire well in hand."

"But," asked Madame de Condamin, "is it known how the fire originated?"

Monsieur de Bourdeu asserted that he had first of all seen a dense smoke issuing from the kitchen. Monsieur Maffre alleged, on the other hand, that the flames had first appeared in a room on the first floor. The sub-prefect shook his head with an air of official prudence, and said in a low voice:

"I am much afraid that malice has had something to do with the disaster. I have ordered an inquiry to be made."

Then he went on to tell them that he had seen a man lighting the fire with a vine-branch.

"Yes, I saw him, too," interrupted Aurélie Rastoil. "It was Monsieur Mouret."

This statement created the greatest astonishment. The thing seemed impossible. Monsieur Mouret escaping and burning down his house—what a frightful story! They overwhelmed Aurélie with questions. She blushed, and her mother looked at her severely. It was scarcely proper for a young girl to be thus constantly looking out of her window at nights.

"I assure you that I distinctly recognized Monsieur Mouret," she continued. "I had not gone to sleep, and I got up when I saw a bright light. Monsieur Mouret was dancing about in the midst of the fire."

Then the sub-prefect spoke:

"Mademoiselle is quite correct. I recognize the unhappy man now. He looked so terrible that I was in doubt as to who it was, although his face seemed familiar to me. Excuse me; this is a very serious matter, and I must go and give some orders."

He went away again, while the company began to discuss this terrible affair of a landlord burning his lodgers to death. Monsieur de Bourdeu inveighed hotly against asylums. The surveillance exercised in them, he said, was most insufficient. The truth was that Monsieur de Bourdeu was greatly afraid that the prefecture which the Abbé Faujas had promised him was being burnt away in the fire before him. "Maniacs are extremely revengeful," was all that Monsieur de Condamin said.

This remark seemed to embarrass everyone, and the conversation dropped entirely. The ladies shuddered slightly, while the men exchanged peculiar glances. The burning house had become an object of still greater interest now that they knew whose hand had set it on fire. They blinked their eyes with a thrill of delicious terror as they gazed upon the glowing pile and thought of the drama that had been enacted there.

"If old Mouret is in there, that makes five," said Monsieur de Condamin. The ladies hushed him and told him that he was a cold-blooded, unfeeling man.

The Paloques had been watching the fire since its commencement from the window of their dining-room. They were just above the drawing-room that had been improvised upon the pathway. The judge's wife at last went out, and graciously offered shelter and hospitality to the Rastoil ladies and their friends who were surrounding them.

Everyone declared that it was very pleasant here, and so Madame Paloque determined to remain there with



them and to take a seat in one of the easy-chairs.

Monsieur Péqueur des Saulaies had re-appeared again and was quite indefatigable, but he never neglected the ladies in spite of the duties and anxieties of all kinds with which he was overwhelmed. He sprang hastily forward to meet Monsieur Delangre, who was just coming back from the Chevillottes alley. They talked together in low tones. The mayor had apparently witnessed some terrible sight, for he kept passing his hand over his face, as though he were trying to drive away from his eyes some awful vision that was pursuing him. The ladies could only hear him murmuring, "We arrived too late! It was horrible!" He would not answer any questions.

"It will be only Bourdeu and Delangre who will regret the Abbé," Monsieur de Condamin whispered into Madame Paloque's ear.

"They had business on hand with him," the latter replied, tranquilly. "Ah! here is the Abbé Bourrette! He is weeping from genuine sorrow."

The Abbé Bourrette, who had formed part of the chain, was sobbing bitterly. The poor man refused all consolation. He would not sit down in one of the easy-chairs, but remained standing with anxious troubled eyes, watching the last beams burn away. The Abbé Surin had also been seen, but he had disappeared after having picked up, by mixing with the crowd, all the information he could.

"Come along, let us be off to bed!" exclaimed Monsieur de Bourdeu. "It is foolish of us to go on stopping here."

"It is all over!" thought Macquart, who still kept his position on the opposite pathway.

He remained there for a few moments longer, listening to the last words which Monsieur de Condamin was exchanging in low tones with Madame Paloque.

"Bah!" said the judge's wife, "no one will cry for him, unless it's that great gander Bourrette. He had grown quite unendurable, and we were all nothing but slaves. Monseigneur, I dare say, has got a smiling face just now. Plassans is at last delivered!"

"And the Rougons!" exclaimed Monsieur de Condamin, "they must be quite delighted."

"I should think so indeed. The Rougons must be up in the skies. They will inherit the Abbé's conquest. Ah! they would have paid anyone very well who would have run the risk of setting the house on fire."

Macquart went away feeling very dissatisfied. He was beginning to fear that he had been duped. The joy of the Rougons filled him with consternation. The Rougons were crafty folks who always played a double game, and whose opponents were quite certain to end by getting the worst of the struggle. As Macquart crossed the Place of the Sub-Prefecture he swore to himself that he would never go to work in this blindfold way again.

As he went upstairs to the room where Marthe lay dying, he found Rose sitting on one of the steps. She was in a fuming rage.

"No, indeed, I will certainly not stop in the room!" she cried. "I won't look on and see such things. Let her die without me; let her die like a dog! I have no longer any love for her, I have no love for anyone. To send for the poor little fellow to kill him! And I consented to go for him! I shall hate myself for it all my life! He was as white as his night-shirt, the angel! I was obliged to carry him here from the Seminary. Oh! it's a cruel shame! And there he has gone into the room now to kiss her! It quite makes my flesh creep. I wish the whole house would topple down on our heads and finish us all off at one stroke! One's whole life

seems made up of things that make one weep and make one angry."

Macquart entered the room. Madame Rougon was on her knees, burying her face in her hands, and Serge, with the tears streaming down his cheeks, was standing by the side of the bed, supporting the head of the dying woman. She had not yet regained consciousness. The last flickering flames of the conflagration cast a ruddy reflection upon the ceiling of the room.

A convulsive tremor shook Marthe's body. She opened her eyes with an expression of surprise and she rose up in bed to glance around her. Then she clasped her hands together with a look of unutterable terror and died as she caught sight of Serge's cassock in the crimson glow.

THE END.



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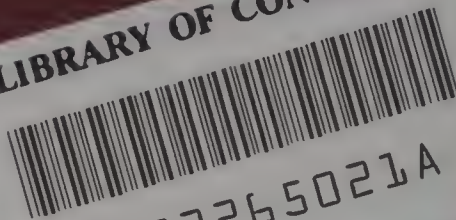








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